

PLANET STORIES

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER
WORLDS—THE UNIVERSE OF
FUTURE CENTURIES



20c

MAY, 1943

ALCATRAZ OF THE STARWAYS

NO ESCAPE BUT DEATH FROM THE
PRISON-HELL OF PARADIM

A STIRRING NOVEL

by HASSE & DE PINA

A LEIGH BRACKETT NOVELET

THE BLUE BEHEMOTH!





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PLANET STORIES



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A THRILLING PLANET NOVEL

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Venus was a world enslaved. And then, like an avenging angel bringing knowledge of a weapon so terrible it had been used but once in the history of the universe, came a Warrior-Princess to strike the shackles from people who wanted only to live in peace.

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Mark closed at the mud surging up to his armpits.

ALCATRAZ OF THE STARWAYS

By ALBERT dePINA and HENRY HASSE

Venus was a world enslaved. And then, like an avenging angel, fanning the flames of raging revolt, came a warrior-princess in whose mind lay dread knowledge—the knowledge of a weapon so terrible it had been used but once in the history of the universe.

“PURPLE!” Mark Denning almost sobbed. A “purple Josphian!” Forgetting the sweat in his eyes and the insufferable heat about him, his

clutching hand held up the mud-dripping globe the size of a baseball, iridescent in the Venusian night.

The phosphorescent glow that bathed



the endless swamp in ghastly green, struck myriad shimmering rainbows from the dark sphere.

"Two more of those and you're free, lower species!" It was an ironic voice, with the resonant sweetness of a cello in its depths, that issued from the haze nearby.

Frantically Mark reached down into the tepid mud, where he had felt the swaying stems of Josphian lilies whip about his knees. Another globe met his hand. He tugged and twisted until it tore from the stem, but when he raised it to the surface, it was white.

Immediately it began to shrink. It would continue until it became the size of a small marble, when it would either rot, as the majority did, or begin to crystallize into a priceless Venusian pearl. But that happened only with one in ten thousand. It was different with the purple ones, they never failed to crystallize into a violet globe of unearthly beauty and incalculable value. Less than a hundred of the purple had ever been found. They were so rare that any prisoner who harvested three, was granted freedom.

"Pretty!" the cello voice taunted, behind Mark. "In a few hours it will be rotting and stinking to high heaven!"

"Cut it, Aladdo!" Mark growled. He tossed the white Josphian into the basket he pushed before him across the mud; the purple one he placed carefully in his trouser pocket. He pushed on, searching the pungent-smelling mud that came up to his thighs.

Suddenly the warm ooze rose to his waist and crept inexorably higher. For an instant, Mark clawed at the mud. It was surging up to his armpits now, as he floundered in the tenacious sink hole. He shook his head to get the sweat out of his eyes and the numbness from his brain. He stopped thrashing about, for he knew that was futile. He threw back his head and gave a shout in which was more than a note of sheer terror.

At least a dozen men were moving near him, waist deep in the Venusian mud. At his cry, they stopped and stared at him dully, fatalistically. They could easily have formed a chain and pulled him out, but none moved. They'd seen too many repetitions of this tragedy to

care anymore. It happened every day; a new man, a little careless, caught in one of the deadly sink holes . . . it happened even to the veterans of this Venusian prison camp, sometimes deliberately, as they became weary of a hopeless existence.

The mud was almost to Mark's chin now; only his forearms and his blond head were visible. Hatred came into his eyes as he glared at the men about him, most of them Earthmen like himself, who would not help him. Again he struggled, tried to hoist himself upward.

"Don't struggle, you fool!" came the resonant voice from behind him. "Be still; every movement helps to sink you!" Then in an undertone "No human was ever able to think clearly, anyway."

Mark smiled despite his predicament, then he urged: "Hurry Aladdo—hurry!"

OVER the expanse of hellish, green-lit muck, a tiny figure inched toward Mark. Scarcely five feet in height, Aladdo's arms and legs were now outspread, to distribute his weight over as much area as possible. The rescuing figure was like an imp from hades, clad as it was in a tight-fitting garment of metallic blue, which even the clinging mud failed to dull; while membranous wings of a lighter hue began at its wrists, joined to the entire under-arm and the sides of its body all the way to its feet, much as the wings of a bat.

Swiftly it crawled and wriggled toward the Earthman, and without a word grasped him with both tiny hands by the arms. It braced itself on its wings, and heaved. A few inches of Mark Denning emerged from the mud with a sucking sound. Again Aladdo made a prodigious effort, and again the Earthman came up from the mud a few more inches.

The winged figure held him there, while it gasped for breath. "Now, spread your arms on the mud and stiffen your neck, sub-species!" The winged one laughed.

Swiftly it cupped its seemingly fragile hands under Mark's chin, and slowly but surely began to pull him back and out. Most of an hour went by before the Earthman's superb torso had emerged and was able to help the rescuer. At last

he was out of the sink hole, panting, almost exhausted and half nude.

He still found strength to feel at his trouser pocket, and was gratified to find his purple Josphian still there. It was now about half its original size, and soon would cease its shrinkage and begin to crystallize.

Mark gazed into the oval face, panting next to his. The heavily fringed eyes were closed as it breathed in labored gasps, and the slender, fragile form shook now and then with nervous spasms. Mark never ceased to wonder at the beauty of the Venusians, nor at their absolute and maddening conviction that theirs was the only true intelligence in the Universe. Now to these qualities Mark added that of indomitable courage, as he gazed at Aladdo and marvelled.

"Well, Aladdo, thanks seems sort of a stupid word in a case like this; I owe you my life. I don't know how I'll ever repay the debt. . . ." Mark's eyes roved over the weird scene, taking in the soulless, hopeless hulks that had once been men. And it suddenly occurred to him that he'd had enough of this hellish corner of Venus; he had been here two months and already he was unable to think clearly, he was becoming identified with the living death of the Venusian Prison Swamp. His mission apparently had failed. What he had come to learn, remained a secret, and he was slowly becoming like these shells of men who prowled the ocean of mud, eventually to disappear beneath it.

"No need to thank me, middle order, I would have missed our discussions had you gone." The Venusian grinned impishly.

"What? I've been promoted! You must be ill, to call me anything above a 'lower order' or a 'sub-species'!" Mark smiled too, but seriously wondered what crime had condemned Aladdo to a prison reserved only for the most hardened and hopeless criminals, or for political prisoners whose existence was a threat to the Tri-Planetary League.

"At times, you're almost intelligent," the Venusian replied placidly. "Any one of these other men would have struggled had they been in your place, and I would have been helpless."

"Why didn't you use *your* brain," Mark couldn't resist prodding the other, "and by flying above me, get to me quicker, instead of crawling all that distance?"

The winged figure laughed mirthlessly, and for an answer held up its arms. The azure membranes that were its wings, hung in limp folds.

"Useless, you see," he said quietly. "The tendons have been cut. Otherwise I could fly up and out of this swamp, despite its five hundred mile width."

MARK could find no words to say. Since being assigned at his own request to this last grim haven of the damned, by the Tri-Planetary Prison Bureau, on a special mission, there had been moments when the horror of it all had made him doubt the wisdom of maintaining such a ghastly place. He knew, of course, the tremendous deterrent influence its existence exerted, besides the important revenue derived from Venusian pearls; still it all seemed too inhuman.

"You don't seem criminal, Earthman!" the cello-like voice introduced on Mark's thoughts. "I fail to catch the typical vibrations of the killers and ravagers. Your crime . . . was it political?"

"Why, yes!" Mark assented hurriedly. It wouldn't do for this Venusian to suspect he was an operative. "To put it briefly, I am classified as too individualistic for the new order of 'controlled endeavor'. Also typed as irreconcilable—and you know what *that* means!"

"Perfectly!" The enigmatic smile hovering on the Venusian's lips faded slowly. "I, too, am a 'political'. My father was Bedrim, the Liberator. All we of Venus asked was real independence instead of the mock freedom your Earth grants us; in reality we are a vassal state with no voice but Earth's."

"Bedrim!" Mark exclaimed, aghast. For more than a decade that name had made history, engulfing three planets in a suicidal struggle that had ended in a stalemate. Bedrim was dead now, Mark knew; but in Venus and even on Mars, the name was a glorious legend. It was only with the greatest effort and vigi-

lance that Earth was able to enforce the peace.

"So *this* is what became of you!" Mark said slowly, softly. "The three worlds do not know, they still wonder—" Then he caught himself and bit his lip.

"Yes," Aladdo murmured bitterly. "The worlds do not know. I was to be given amnesty, I was so young; but your inner Council decided that as long as I lived I would be a rallying point for irreconcilables of Venus, and so I was hunted from planet to planet until . . . well, here I am on my own world, but as far away from my people as if I were on Betelgeuse. Here I do not live."

"But surely there must be some way of convincing the Council that you're harmless! And if that fails, well . . . of getting you out of here!"

"Out of Paradim?" Aladdo's smile had all the despairing bitterness of a soul damned for all eternity; all the tears and the anguish and the wracking sorrow of the condemned since the world began seemed to be frozen for an instant in that smile. "Look about you, Earthman!"

It was true. Mark had to acknowledge the psychological genius who had devised the Venusian Prison System. For five hundred miles the swamp Paradim extended in either direction, impassable, pitted with sink holes into which a man would disappear without trace. And beyond were the impenetrable jungles, alive with lurking carnivora, lurking monsters of the night, red in tooth and claw. Only on the opposite hemisphere were the two larger and hospital continents of Venus.

Here, on this tiny continent, the prison ship came once a month, to hover over the tiny islet in the middle of the swamp, the only spot of firm ground for untold miles. Here it dropped supplies and food, and occasionally picked up the little heaps of fabulous Venusian pearls. There were no guards and none were needed, for at night when the awful humidity increased, the men worked or died. With night came the dreaded fog, lurid in the ghostly illumination of the *igniis fatui*, the phosphorescent radiance of this vast graveyard. And the idle died. Decomposition of the blood set in; essential salts within their bodies were dissolved, cellular ac-

tivity ceased, and their bodies bloated. Not many, however, were idle.

Escape? For years it had been thought a virtual impossibility. The very thought would have brought smiles to the grim faces of that august body, the Tri-Planetary Bureau of Prisons. And yet—a notorious killer who had been sent to this swamp only a year ago, had recently been found dead—out in space!

A PATROL ship had found the body floating a few thousand miles off Callisto, an atom-blast hole drilled neatly through the forehead. There was not the slightest doubt that this was the same man. How had this criminal been able to escape the swamp and travel to Callisto, millions of miles away? It was a mystery and above all, a challenge. Apparently the Venus Prison had ceased to be impregnable. And that was why Mark Denning, the Prison Bureau's leading investigator, was here.

"Guard your pearl, middle species," Aladdo's voice was ironic once more. "Escape, and with it you may buy a pardon!" Without a backward glance, the Venusian moved on with nightmare slowness through the swirling mists, pushing his basket into which the Josphian globes were loaded.

Escape, Mark thought, following the Venusian. He did not need to escape, he could signal the prison ship to pick him up the next time it arrived. He wondered if he should. He had been here two months, and they were an eternity that dwarfed any concept of hell. But he hadn't any clue to the mystery of the escaping convicts, and he could hardly return with a confession of failure.

He looked ahead through the mists, at the slender body of Aladdo in its tight-fitting sheath of metallic blue. "I *would* miss Aladdo," Mark whispered to himself; "and if he can't stand it here, I should be able to!"

"What are you mumbling about to yourself?" Aladdo's mocking voice came back to him. "That lowers you from the middle species to the sub species again." He held up a Josphian globe against the greenish swamp glow. "White," he said contemptuously and threw it into the basket.

Pushing through the muck with his tremendous strength, Mark cut the distance that separated them. "You may have my purple one, Aladdo. I will not need it, and perhaps you . . . with it you might. . . ."

"If I were to gather a hundred purple ones, I could not buy my release." The Venusian was staring at Mark peculiarly, as if wondering why he should have made that offer. "Do you suppose, Earthman, any of the other men saw you find it? They would kill you for it—cheerfully."

"No, I think not; no one saw me bring it up but you."

"Then guard it." Aladdo eyed Mark's powerful frame critically. "Guard it with your life, for you may have to fight for it soon."

"Telepathy! You've caught someone's thought vibrations?" Mark asked in a whisper. He well knew that telepathy, although not commonly used, was an established fact among the Venusians.

But Aladdo's long lashes rested against pallid cheeks, veiling eyes that were averted with something Mark could not understand. "No," the winged one said at last, "it wasn't a thought vibration—not that clear—perhaps a vibration of evil! Be alert, Earthman. I can say no more."

"All right, thanks, Aladdo." But inwardly Mark cursed the inherent Venusian mania for ultra-reserve, for making a mystery of even the most commonplace affairs. "Let's head for the island, it's almost dawn."

Above, the cloud-cap was prismatic with color as the sun tried feebly to penetrate the grayness and then gave up the attempt, as if it had tried many times before and failed. Slowly the vast swamp's contours came into view, with their small island a faint green line against the horizon's rim. And as the grayish dawn light increased, suffusing the grim morass, Mark and Aladdo made their slow way toward it.

II

"UP you go!" Mark's long muscles corded as he heaved and Aladdo's body left the mud with a sucking sound, to sprawl on the solid ground of the island. Presently the Earthman joined

him, and for a few seconds they rested silently.

All around them the vegetation surged, lush and matted, inextricably tangled with parasitic vines. Whereas the expanse of swamp was bare of the myriad growths of Venus, for some unknown chemical reason, the island itself was riotous with them. It was as if every inch of *terra firma* were precious. The humid air was hot and stagnant, heavy with the overpowering fragrance of flowers. Even after two months of conditioning, Mark had difficulty in breathing, as the odors of this alien world increased as the temperature rose.

"Arrgh, what a world!" Mark said disgustedly, as he rose to his feet. "I'm going to bathe, before the gang arrives. You'd better come too." Together they went up the vine-entangled path toward the barracks, and, rounding a corner of the building, followed another path to where a small spring gushed from an elevation; it fell in a sparkling shower and then meandered a few feet to lose itself in the swamp.

Aladdo, as usual, merely let the water flow over the metallic suit that sheathed the slender body. By the time they had finished bathing, the rest of the convicts began to emerge from radiating paths, to dump their swamp pearls onto the growing heap by the side of their barracks. Some of the men threw themselves on the ground, exhausted in minds and bodies, and were almost instantly asleep. A few sat against the barracks wall and chewed the deadly *tsith* stems, their eyes vacant, their faces gray. *Tsith* was awful stuff, even if it did banish pain. Mark knew that these men wouldn't last long, but he wondered if perhaps they weren't the wiser ones after all!

Returning from his bath to the barracks, Mark found that Aladdo had disappeared. He entered, and donned a thin rubberoid garment from among his meager store of personal belongings. It resembled one of the ancient woolen suits that Earthmen had used against the cold many centuries before; but there was a great difference. Mark's garment was impervious to cold or heat, highly flexible, yet the interlining of allurium mesh could intercept anything short of a ray blast.

When Mark emerged, he found Aladdo talking in very low tones, with a tall, Martian-Venusian half-breed. This man was fantastic. He had the slenderness of the Venusians, and the finely chiseled features, but his eyes were Martian—deep purple and immense, far too large for the face. The breadth of shoulder and barrel chest was Martian too, ludicrous in comparison with the wasp waist and slender thighs.

Mark had seen this half-breed about the swamp before, and wondered who he was. Now Aladdo, glancing up, called to him. Mark walked over to them.

"This is Luhor, Earthman," the Venusian crossed both hands at the wrists in the immemorial Venusian gesture indicating that a friend was being introduced. "Luhor, the Earthman's name is Mark. He is the one I told you about. Note the muscular power of the body, the intelligence of the face, no less than middle-order. I think you shall find him most useful."

MARK felt as if he were on the auction block, as Aladdo calmly pointed out his physical attributes. He was mystified. At the back of his mind a vague memory strove to emerge; it was barely a sense of having seen this man Luhor before, moving among the torpid convicts and whispering to them briefly. Perhaps it had been an allusion of the swamp's night glow, and yet, the feeling persisted. Mark extended his hand to the Maritan-Venusian, who eyed him silently, expressionless, without grasping the proffered hand. Around them, the atmosphere was electric.

At last Luhor spoke. "Only fifteen can go. They have been picked out!" His was a rumbling voice, emotionless—cold.

"Eliminate one then," Aladdo said imperiously.

"How? They'll fight like Ocelandians; they already know they've been picked, O Aladdian!"

Then Mark Denning understood. Escape was being planned. Aladdo was one of those to go, and was trying to induce Luhor to include him! Mark's heart was pounding, he knew that it was now or never; he must be among those who escaped. He would never again be so close

to the solution of the mysteries he had been sent here to solve.

"I'm new here," Mark spoke hurriedly. "Look at my arms, my chest. I have tremendous strength and endurance. My vitality has not been sapped by the swamp as yet. Take me also, Luhor, I'll repay you beyond anything you can dream of!"

The half-breed's mouth twisted slowly into a cold sneer as he gazed at the Earthman, then he shrugged his shoulders. It might have meant anything, but Mark thought it meant denial. In silence Luhor bowed to Aladdo and strode off toward a group of several men. It was odd, Mark thought—a half-breed convict showing such a mark of respect to another convict. But perhaps it was because Luhor was half Venusian, and Bedrim had been Aladdo's father. Mark turned questioningly to Aladdo.

He was amazed to see sudden alarm leap into the Venusian's eyes, together with a warning cry.

Mark stepped lithely aside, but not in time to avoid a terrific blow between his shoulder-blades that left a burning point of fire in his flesh. He half fell to his knees, but whirled around to confront a bestial face, maddened now by blood-lust. In the attacker's hand was the haft and a piece of broken blade from what had evidently been a smuggled knife. It was useless now, shattered against the alurium mesh interlining of Mark's suit.

With a cry of baffled rage the attacking Earthman hurled the broken weapon into Mark's face, and launched himself close behind it. Mark rolled slightly aside, then gained his feet and whirled to face his attacker. Mark was icy calm now, He awaited the convict's next rush, then sent a straight left unerringly to the man's head, driving him off-balance. Mark kept facing him, balanced lightly on his toes as the man came boring back in tenaciously. Mark's right arm was a peg upon which he hung the convict's blow, while he used the boxer's left, long and weaving, throwing it swiftly three times like a cat sparring with a mouse.

The killer rushed, aggressive and eager. Mark let his heels touch the ground this time, refused to give way. He took a murderous hook to the stom-

ach without flinching, countered with a quick left to the face and then a vicious right-cross. The convict's face seemed to lose contour, its features blurred as the face went gory; his feet crossed and his knees went suddenly rubbery, he fell with a crash and didn't get up.

MARK towered above him, breathing heavily, only now aware of the little group of interested men who had watched.

"You fight like a Venusian Ocelandian—as ruthless, and as methodical." It was Luhor who stepped forward and spoke; he was grinning twistedly as he surveyed Mark's handiwork.

"Now I wonder why he wanted to eliminate me?" Mark gestured puzzledly.

For an answer Aladdo, standing close by him, tapped the spot where in a hidden, inner pocket reposed the purple pearl. The gesture went unnoticed by Luhor, but Mark suddenly understood.

"What do you care?" Luhor waved a hand as if dismissing the fallen foe. "He was one of the chosen. You may take his place, Earthman, since you have so neatly disabled him." His large weird eyes took in Mark's physique with a new interest.

To Aladdo he said, "You have your wish." Again there was that odd note of deference in his voice. He bowed slightly and turned away again to the gathered little group of men.

"When do we start?" Mark whispered eagerly to Aladdo.

But the Venusian's eyes were preternaturally bright. A frail hand was held up for silence. Mark stood tense, listening. The brightness of Aladdo's eyes seemed to increase.

And then Mark heard it. They all heard it. It was unbelievable.

The low, powerful hum of a repulsion beam rent the stillness. It was faint and far away at first, but became steadily louder. This, Mark knew, was not the hornet's hum of the tiny craft the Prison Bureau sent with supplies; this was the unmistakable vibration of a Spacer hovering above them!

Soon the immense bulk of the spaceship dropped slowly from the cloud banks above, like a silvery ghost descending. It

hovered fifty feet above the islet, the powerful repulsion beam humming its deafening drone. An under-hull lock opened. A long flexible ladder rushed uncoiling through the murky atmosphere until it struck the ground a dozen paces from the barracks.

"Back!" Luhor's voice crackled like an icy javelin as an avalanche of humanity scrambled toward the ladder, clawing, tearing and screaming. In his hand he held an atom-blast capable of annihilating that entire snarling group. They saw it and halted uncertainly. Luhor strode calmly toward the ladder and again shouted, "Back, you vermin!" He brought the weapon up as if to fire, and the tattered dregs who had been human beings still prized life enough to retreat sullenly.

In a cold voice Luhor called names from a list in his hand. His huge purple orbs inspected each man to step forward, then he waved them toward the ladder. Aladdo was first, and Mark's heart leaped as the Venusian scrambled up the weaving ladder, grasping the metal rungs with fragile hands. One by one, fifteen convicts were called. Mark was among the last, and he heard Luhor ordering the remaining convicts into the swamp. Two disobeyed and leaped forward desperately. Luhor's atom-blast spat, one man dropped in his tracks and the other went scrambling back. Cries, imprecations, curses and pleadings dwindled as the men retreated to the mud.

It was then that Luhor himself began to ascend the rungs, as the ladder was slowly pulled up. A rush of maddened convicts clawed at empty air as the stairway to freedom rose above their heads. Luhor laughed mocking'y down at them. Mark, just above, suddenly hated Luhor for that.

INSIDE the Spacer, with the air-lock closed, Luhor turned to the waiting men. His rumbling voice rose commandingly. "Anyone with weapons, whatever they are, throw them on the floor before you; if you refuse, or we have to search you and find them, you'll be dropped through the air-lock into the swamp. Choose!"

The absolute cold finality of his tone

left no doubt. A veritable arsenal of sharpened rocks, crude metal knives, and bent wires coated with deadly poison from Venusian plants, showered down.

"All through?" The half-breed's purple eyes ranged down the line of men, as if he could see into their minds. There was a moment of silence, then one of the men hesitantly dropped an outmoded heat-gun, old-fashioned but deadly. Luhor's eyebrows went up, and he smiled thinly. "All right," he told a member of the crew, "gather up this junk and toss it out. You new men follow me. First you'll sluice off the mud and put on some decent clothes. Afterwards you'll see the *Commander*; and," he added, "the *Commander* will see you!" A fleeting smile hovered on his lips as if he had a little joke all his own.

Mark was amazed at the spaciousness of the ship, and at the luxury of its appointments. It was apparent at once that this was no ordinary Spacer, for it was a fighting craft as well—a long, slim torpedo of death modern beyond anything he'd ever seen. He only obtained a glimpse of a few of the craft's weapons, but they looked formidable enough to tackle anything the Tri-Planetary ships could muster. He tried not to appear too curious, however; he knew that just now his best bet was to look dazed and docile.

He glanced around for Aladdo, but the little Venusian had disappeared. Mark wasn't too surprised. He was satisfied to know that Aladdo was on the ship, and that eventually he would appear.

The men scrubbed themselves with soap under needles of warm water, and achieved cleanliness for the first time in many months. Dressed in clean trousers and tunics, they were ready at last to go before the Commander. The men moved restlessly and whispered among themselves. None knew where they were going, or why. They only knew that a miracle had happened and they had been delivered from the great swamp. It didn't occur to any of them as yet that there could be a situation even remotely as bad as their living death in the swamp.

One by one, they were called, as they waited in the ship's comfortable leisure-room. At its far end was an automatic beryllium door, and as each man's name

was called through an amplifier, the door would open to permit a man to go through. Already nine men had passed through, and none had emerged.

Mark could hardly restrain his impatience. Behind that door was the solution of a great mystery—a mystery which had grown in importance beyond anything the Prison Bureau officials had dreamed of, Mark realized, considering the perilous super-efficiency of this spaceship, now speeding away from Venus!

MARK'S name was called last, and he tried to achieve a careless nonchalance as he walked toward the door that opened silently for him. He would not have been too surprised to find that Aladdo was the Commander of this ship; that thought had occurred to him. As he entered the huge compartment, however, he had only a confused impression of brilliant lighting and indiscriminate luxury. Magnificent, ceiling-high tapestries covered the metal walls; beneath his feet, the resilient pile of an imperial Martian rug was a splash of varicolored splendour. Ornaments from three planets were everywhere, some of them museum pieces, like the desk of extinct Martian *Majagua* wood, inlaid with miniature mosaics of semi-precious stones.

"Loot from the spacelanes!" Mark exclaimed inwardly. And then he was beyond all amazement as his gaze went across the bright room, and he saw the two people present.

One was Luhor, dressed resplendently now, the shadow of a smile upturning the corners of his mouth. He was standing. Seated at a desk beside him was a girl. She was clad in a close-fitting uniform of a white, gleaming material like watered silk.

Mark slowly let out his breath, and then he crossed the room. He wondered if she were really that beautiful, or if it was just the garish lights and surroundings.

She spoke first. "If you must be amazed, please do it quickly. I am weary of these interviews."

Mark looked at her eyes that were blue but unsmiling, and lips that smiled thinly but didn't mean it. Her slightly turned-up nose would have been amus-

ing ordinarily but wasn't now. Coppery brown hair was brushed smoothly back from her forehead, to fall in waves to her shoulders. Mark wished she would smile with her eyes as well as her lips.

His own smile faded, he took a deep breath and said, "I am sufficiently amazed."

"Good. Then we can proceed. Luhor, is this the last one?"

"Yes. He's the one I was telling you about."

She turned her cold blue eyes upon Mark again. Her voice was emotionless, almost a monotone. "Luhor tells me you were exceedingly anxious to leave the Venus swamp. Why?"

"Why!" Mark repeated in amazement. "Why does any man want to leave there? It's a living death—and I was slowly going crazy."

"You had only been there a few months?"

"That's right."

"Why were you sent there?"

Mark hesitated for a split second, and decided he had better stick to the same story he'd told Aladdo. "I'm a 'political'," he said.

She nodded, as though satisfied. "I have never been actually in the swamp. I understand that you worked hard there?"

"Yes, very hard. We had to, to stay alive."

"You will work very hard for me—for the same reason. Perhaps you will wish you had stayed in the swamp. What can you do?"

Mark brightened. "Around a spaceship? I can handle rocket-tubes, or controls. Also probably any weapon you care to mention. Calculations and differential equations are pretty easy. I could almost quote you the entire *Advanced Principles of Space Navigation*. . . ." With a rush of nostalgia Mark was remembering all the mechanics and mathematics of his four years in Government Spacer School. He went on with cool confidence, "I could take one of your atomotors apart, jumble the pieces and put it together again. I'm really a mechanic rather than a spaceman. Spacery's only a hobby of mine. . . ."

She swung her eyes over to the half-

breed. Luhor nodded, grinning with huge amusement. She said to Mark:

"You will work at the mines, where you are going. You can make *that* a hobby of yours. I do not like men with me in space who know more about a ship than I do."

Mark slowly seethed, but said nothing. She waved a slim hand in dismissal. Luhor, still grinning, showed Mark the door by which to go out.

III

MARK awakened suddenly, aware that someone was shaking him. Intense light almost blinded him as he opened his eyes, and he shut them hurriedly. He lay for a few seconds enjoying the luxury of the berth on which he had slept. It had been long since he'd felt the yielding comfort of a coil-pad beneath his body, or cool Lynon sheets against his flesh.

"Rouse yourself, sluggard!" The voice was mocking, familiar, rich with golden overtones. "Get that deficient brain of yours to working, lower order!"

"Aladdo! You Venusian demon—where have you been?" In his delight Mark grabbed Aladdo's slender hands and almost crushed them. "I was beginning to think I'd have to tear this ship apart to find you!"

"My hands!" Aladdo exclaimed in alarm and withdrew them. But there was shining joy in his smile. Perched on the edge of the berth, the tiny Venusian regarded the giant Earthman with laughing eyes, bluer even than the azure wings that hung like a cloak. But it was a subtly different Aladdo; glowing and clean until the exquisitely chiseled face was like alabaster, the curling close-cropped hair blue-black and gleaming.

Dressed in a soft gray tunic and tight white trousers, the wings were vivid in contrast, almost iridescent. The tiny feet were encased in bootlets of red Ocelandian fur, and a belt of platinum links circled the narrow waist, holding a holster with a small short-range atom-blast.

Surprised, Mark flicked a forefinger at the weapon and looked inquiringly at Aladdo. "They let you have this?"

"Yes," the Venusian nodded. "Remem-

ber, Bedrim was my father; I can be most useful to them. Although my father's dead, there are still followers on three planets, ready at a moment's notice to rally behind a leader. I could be that leader—or at least appear to be. I am a guest of honor on this cruiser—a prisoner, of course," Aladdo smiled ironically, "but shown every courtesy. I even have my own private quarters instead of sleeping here with the crew."

"But what is it all about, Aladdo?" Mark was exasperated as the mystery grew. "What's the purpose behind all this? Ruthless criminals salvaged from a Venusian Prison swamp, and now this super-cruiser built to withstand anything! And who is that girl? I—" But the Venusian interrupted him.

"No time now. You'll learn everything presently. Dress quickly and come with me."

"I'm dressed," Mark answered, springing up. He zipped on light, insulated shoes and followed Aladdo to the main cabin. The rest of the men were already there, clustered about the starboard ports in an excited group. The light in this room was blazing. Mark could feel the gentle vibration of the atomotors somewhere deep in the spaceship, and again the question overwhelmed him: where were they going?

HE was soon to learn. Recklessly he gazed out into space. Instantly he pivoted away, as if a gigantic hand had spun him. He had looked almost directly into the sun!

It was a sun vast beyond imagining, tongues of flame flickering slowly out for thousands of miles. He knew it was only the thickness of the Crystyte ports that saved the men's eyes. Slowly Mark's eyes became accustomed to the fierce glare and by shading them obliquely he could discern the object of the men's excitement—a dark little speck of a planet sweeping in its orbit just beyond the sun's rim. It rapidly grew larger as the spaceship moved inward on a long tangent.

"Mercury!" Mark exclaimed, staring.

"No, we crossed the orbit of Mercury two hours ago." It was Aladdo who spoke beside him.

"Then, that must be . . . but it's impossible!" Mark laughed a little wildly. "How long since we left Venus?"

"Ten hours, Earthman. It is possible. That is the planet Vulcan."

"Unbelievable," Mark almost whispered. "Why, it takes the fastest Patrol cruiser forty-eight hours to reach Mercury's orbit from Venus. Lord! What sort of speed has this Spacer?"

But Aladdo didn't answer. A door had opened and Luhor stepped in.

"Vulcan," he said tonelessly. "As we approach, even the thickness of these ports won't be enough. Put on these."

He handed the men pairs of Crystyte goggles, the lenses specially processed.

"Does this mean we're actually going to attempt a landing on Vulcan?" Mark asked the half-breed. "It's madness! It has never been done!"

"But it has been done." Luhor gazed at Mark frigidly. "You merely have never heard of it."

"Who's at the controls?" Mark struggled to subdue the excitement in his voice.

"Why, the Commander, naturally—assisted by myself." Luhor's vast chest arched with pride. "Observe closely, Earthman, and you will be treated to as masterly a feat of navigation as you're likely ever to see again!" His purple orbs roved over the men, clean-dressed, and rested, the haunted look beginning to fade from their eyes. He nodded approval, as he turned and left.

"A base at Vulcan!" Mark was repeating inwardly. And a cold fear at this growing mystery grew apace within him.

It was not only a masterly feat of navigation—it was incredible as the hurtling spaceship continued along its tangent, until Vulcan, slightly smaller than Mercury, came swinging around to bisect their trajectory.

Very neatly, their speed was manipulated to allow the planet to come between them and the sun; then the great Spacer began to pursue a direct course. Mark noticed that Vulcan kept one side eternally sunwards. Swiftly the spaceship approached the dark, outward side. Actually it was not "dark" but it could be called so in comparison with the

molten sunward side.

Mark realized the almost insurmountable difficulty of keeping the Spacer on a trajectory, with the sun's tremendous gravitational pull so dangerously near; the slightest deviation now would send them hurtling past Vulcan and into that flaming hecotomb. He knew, as well, that there could be no atmosphere on Vulcan to help them brake.

BUT even as these thoughts were racing through his mind, Vulcan came rushing up at them with the fury of a miniature hell running rampant. Its surface was lividly aglow, with the flaming curve of the sun as a backdrop blotting out the horizon. Suddenly they were leveling over its surface, at a speed that to Mark spelled disaster. He saw the fore-jets flaming over a wide terrain of what might have been lava or pumice, but that didn't seem to check their reckless speed at all. Directly ahead black mountain ranges sheered upward as if to disembowel the ship on jagged summits. Mark merely closed his eyes, awaiting the crash that seemed inevitable. No ship he knew could ever brake in time at that suicidal speed.

A terrific force jarred him to the floor. A profound nausea made him retch. Then Luhor was touching his shoulder, and Mark opened his eyes.

"All out, we're home!" the half-breed grinned. "You're lucky that the synchronized magnetic fields minimize deceleration, Earthman." Doors were opening, voices were drifting into the ship. The vibration of the atomotors had ceased.

White-faced and shaken, the men debarked into a wide corridor hewn out of solid rock, into which the ship had berthed. Glancing back, Mark saw metal doors of titanic proportions now hermetically closed; ahead were similar doors. Then he heard the deep, far-away throbbing of generators and he knew that he was in an air-lock built on a gigantic scale. A few seconds later the inner doors slid open.

As they walked forward Luhor turned to Mark with a proud smile. "You won't find *that* type of navigation in the 'Advanced Principles,' eh, Earthman?"

"No, indeed not," Mark admitted. "But I still don't understand that braking process!"

Luhor pointed to colossal sets of coils, in niches along each side of the vast corridor. "Synchronized magnetic degeneration fields; they arrest mass and speed synchronously, finally stopping the spacer in a graduating net of force. Similar coils to these exist for a mile along the gorge back there, through which we came. Even so it is a very delicate and precise process."

They stepped into a grotto so vast as to dwarf anything Mark had ever imagined. It extended for miles, sheltering an entire little city! Mark saw rows of stone dwellings, stream-lined, ultra-modern. From larger buildings came the sounds of blast furnaces and an occasional flash of ruddy glow. Groups of workmen hurried past, glanced curiously at the new arrivals but didn't stop to fraternize. And then Mark saw Carston.

Ernest Carston! One of the very highest men among the Tri-Planetary Prison Bureau officials! The surprise stopped Mark Denning in his tracks, but fortunately, thanks to his training, he managed to keep his face impassive as they recognized each other simultaneously. Carston flashed him a quick look that seemed to say, "Later!"

Then the newcomers were marching in silence to a spacious building, where they were assigned rooms. The furnishings were simple, but comfortable, and Luhor led them to the rear of the building where the dining-room was located.

They ate with the famished eagerness of men who had long subsisted on compressed synthetic rations. Then they were issued cigarettes. To the men who had been doomed on Venus only a few hours previously, it was like awakening in heaven from a nightmare in hell.

Through Mark's mind ran an ancient saying: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow. . . ."

IV

STANDING in the doorway, the girl of the unsmiling blue eyes surveyed the new men silently. Her trim, aloof figure instantly commanded their attention, and their respect as well.

"I cannot waste words on you," she said abruptly, "for my time is limited. I know all of your names, so you shall

know mine as well, although it will mean nothing to you. I am Cynthia Marnik, but you will address me always as Commander. You will obey me implicitly in all things here. Second to me, you will obey Luhor.

"All of you volunteered to come. Now that you're here, you are part of our scheme of things and you will work as hard as you did in the swamp. It is dangerous work, but you will have ample remuneration. Idlers and grumblers will be done away with, I promise you. Your lives were forfeit in the swamp, and that is not altered by your being on Vulcan." She paused as if waiting for objections, but every man was silent.

"Very well; Luhor will explain later what you're here for. Meanwhile you are free to go anywhere you like within the city, but be ready to work about eight earth-hours from now." As abruptly as she had come, Commander Cynthia Marnik turned and was gone.

The men smoked and talked among themselves, speculating what their tasks might be. The memory of the Prison Swamp was too recent for them to care much.

Mark rose quietly and stepped out of the dining-room. He'd noticed that Aladdo was absent from the meal, and he wondered if his Venusian friend was still an 'honored guest.' Deciding to inspect the city, Mark tried to retrace his steps to those buildings where he had heard the blast furnaces; but at the first cross-corridor Ernest Carston stepped out and walked beside him. He smiled at Mark Denning, but held a warning finger to his lips.

They walked in silence, while the corridors became rockier and more dimly lighted. At last, far away from the city, Carston stopped under an immense jutting rock and quietly gripped Mark's hand. There was a world of feeling in his voice as he said barely whispering:

"I'd lost hope of ever seeing any of you again!"

"How did you get here?" Mark asked the question that had been burning in his mind. "Did they pick you up at the swamp, too?"

"Yes. We're both on the same trail—and here the trail ends."

"But I had no idea you'd preceded me," Mark told him. "It must have been considered a far more important assignment than I was told, to send you to the Swamp!"

"We didn't know, we weren't certain," Carston said thoughtfully. "But we received a bit of information which, if true, was of the greatest importance. It seemed impossible, fantastic, but the hazard was so great, that even what amounted to a vague rumor warranted my going. You were to follow in a few months, without knowing I had gone ahead. Well, you already know most of the rest; but Earth's government doesn't even suspect the deadly peril it will soon have to face!"

"I'm afraid," Mark stated frankly, "that there are a lot of gaps in what I do know. I can tell, of course, that something mighty big is going on here. But what was that bit of information you received?"

"It goes back nearly a quarter of a century," Carston replied slowly, "and concerns a man named George Marnik. He, and his young wife, were among the first pioneers to venture out to Callisto. Those were the ruthless years, when the great Earth Monopolies stopped at nothing, were very often lawless, and usually got what they wanted." Carston paused to light a cigarette.

"GEORGE MARNIK," he went on, "discovered one of the richest palladium veins on Callisto, and was developing it slowly. But—one of the Monopolies decided that it wanted Marnik's rich vein. In an ensuing struggle with some of the Monopoly's hired hoodlums, Marnik's wife was burned down brutally with an electro-gun. She left a daughter, about five years old, whom they had named Cynthia . . . do you follow me?"

"Go on," Mark said in a cold, dry voice. "Well, after the tragedy, George Marnik disappeared. He was never heard of again—except by the Earth Monopolies. They heard of him plenty. He terrorized the spacelanes for years, and more than one Monopoly went under, bankrupt by the incessant attacks on their ships by an enemy who had achieved a ruthlessness greater even than theirs. It was rumored that Marnik had vowed never

to set foot on Earth again, and that his life was dedicated to the destruction of the Monopolies. He almost achieved his task, except that the Earth's government finally stepped in and dissolved the Monopolies." Carston paused and drew in a long breath.

"And then?" Mark urged, as if fascinated by this saga of another day.

"Why, then as you know, Emperor Bedrim of Venus achieved his famous alliance with Dar Vaajo of Mars, and together they sought to end Earth's domination and exploitation of their planets. You know about the bitter ten years' war—that's history. But when the Tri-Planetary Patrol was formed, during the truce that followed at the death of Bedrim, half the Solar System was searched for George Marnik's base and the rich plunder he was reputed to have there. It was all in vain. You can now see why! The Patrol has never been able to land on Vulcan."

"But if I remember correctly," Mark Denning said reminiscently, "George Marnik was certified as dead, as the years went by and piracy ceased. The records gave no information as to his daughter Cynthia, she was merely marked 'Missing.'"

"Precisely!" Carston assented.

"Then that vital bit of information you received must have concerned this base on Vulcan!"

"No. Worse! It concerned that George Marnik *was alive and planning to end the Inter-Planetary Truce, to loose bitter war upon three worlds again!*"

"Good Lord!" Mark was stunned. "But how? Venus and Mars were disarmed under Earth's dictated peace!"

"Yes, true. Mars is a small and dying race and not to be greatly feared. But Venus has never become reconciled. You know their unholy pride and their utter conviction that theirs are the greatest minds in our universe. Underneath the apparently peaceful surface, revolt's smoldering."

"Revolt fanned by Marnik?"

"Yes," Carston went on. "If George Marnik did have some fantastic plan in mind, Venus would be the likeliest place for him to find backing and followers.

On the face of it, it seemed absurd, of course. But when the supply of Venusian Pearls dwindled to a mere trickle, and a criminal from the swamp was found dead millions of miles away, in the vicinity of Callisto, we knew then that there was a definite tie-up. It was time to investigate. George Marnik, the last space pirate, is *alive*—an ancient, embittered wreck living on hate!" Carston fell silent.

"AND Commander Cynthia, his daughter," Mark whispered musingly, "is the one in charge now!"

"Yes. You wouldn't have believed it possible, eh? But remember, during those reckless years when her father was the most hunted man in the universe, Cynthia grew up with him, constantly at his side, learning all the tricks of a master at piracy. She must share her father's hatred for a world that only brought them tragedy and sorrow. Marnik's psychopathic, of course, his mind's warped; she must share his views, although at times I wonder . . . sometimes when I look at her. . . ." His voice dwindled.

"So it all boils down to one thing," Mark's analytical mind had already absorbed all the facts. "That Spacer that brought us here is a menace to civilization. Its speed alone is beyond anything we have at present; a fleet of them could wreak havoc on Earth's forces. Earth must be warned at all costs, Carston!"

Ernest Carston looked at Mark pityingly, lines of weariness and anxiety creasing his face. "Do you think," he said slowly, "if there were any way out, I would be here? Vulcan and the Venus Swamp both have a thing in common: there's no escape, escape through Marnik. Commander Cynthia only carries out his orders."

"But she's a woman, Carston. If she could be made to realize what another Inter-Planetary war means—the awful carnage, the destruction—perhaps she could somehow be reached!"

"I wish that were possible!" Carston exclaimed fervently. "But she's like a being that's hypnotized. George Marnik must dominate her completely, old and decrepit as he must be. Remember, it's

the only life she's ever known. He must be the only being she's ever loved."

"Have you any concrete knowledge of their plans?"

"No. Only deductions. Dar Vaajo, ruler of Mars, was here three weeks ago. Cynthia brought him. For hours he was with Marnik in the latter's palace. That can only mean one thing, of course. And then there's the new metal. That is the real problem and the real menace!"

"Metal? A new alloy?" Mark Denning was all interest.

"Nothing so simple as that," Carston explained with tragic calm. "A metal unique in the universe! A new, *allotropic* form of beryllium which *beyond a certain temperature reacts by hardening in direct ratio to pressure and heat!* Once cast, it is literally heat and blast proof, and so light that it triples efficiency in relation to fuel consumption. And George Marnik's building, has been building, a fleet of these Super-Spacers!"

"I suppose they're mining that metal here?" Mark's face was white.

"Yes, on the *sunward* side of Vulcan! That's what swamp convicts are brought here for."

"And I suppose either the ore, or the smelted metal's being shipped to secret bases on Mars and Venus?" Mark's voice was strained and opaque.

"Not yet, Earthman!" The alien voice was at once like a whiplash and like a fragment of music. Both men whirled about.

OUT of the shadows, as if emerging from the bizarre scene of tortured rocks and twisted cavern-walls, stepped a slender figure with pendant wings.

"Aladdo!" Mark felt a curious tingling at sight of his Venusian friend, as he went forward with hands outstretched.

It was nothing compared to the shock mirrored on Carston's face. "Aladdian!" he too exclaimed, a mixture of despair and impotent rage in his voice.

"Peace, lower order!" Aladdo laughed, but hiding his hands behind his back as he addressed Mark. "I shall not trust my hands to you again. *It is enough to have crippled wings!*" The Venusian stared full into Carston's eyes as he uttered the last words significantly, and the

latter's face turned deep red.

"Are you still a guest? Where are they keeping you? I've missed you . . ." Mark turned to Carston, his face alight. "Aladdo saved my life in the swamp!"

"I'm staying with the Commander and her father. It is a small universe after all," he added, turning to Carston, "eh, Colonel?"

"You know each other?" Mark asked, surprised.

Carston's face reddened and then paled. "I'm a servant of my Government," he answered the Venusian stiffly. "My duty is to obey, not to question orders, Princess!"

"What is all this? What do you mean, 'Princess'? Will someone explain?" Mark was exasperated.

"Aladdian's the daughter of the late Emperor Bedrim of Venus," Carston said, then fell silent.

A look at the Venusian's smiling face told Mark it was true. His own face was ludicrous, his mouth partly open, for the moment speechless. Then a dark flush of anger swept up like a tide to the roots of his hair.

"A girl . . . a defenseless girl that's never committed a crime in her life, condemned to that Venus Swamp! To the most ghastly, the most cruel living-death in the universe . . ." Words failed him as he shook with rage. "What was Earth's Government thinking of? The Council must have been mad!" Mark Denning choked.

"Careful!" Ernest Carston warned. "Remember you're an Earthman, Denning. To question the Council is treason!"

"Treason be damned, and the Council too!" Mark raged. "There are limits! There's no reason for that Prison Swamp except greed. Better atom-blast habitual criminals than to condemn them there; *that* is worse than any crime!" He towered above Carston, a formidable engine of destruction, his face a mask of fury.

Then a tiny, fragile hand was on his arm and the Venusian's calm voice rose in the brief silence, "It is too late to remould the past. But we can refashion the immediate future, Mark Denning."

"Can we? How? It seems that Marnik and Commander Cynthia hold all the cards!"

"Not all," Aladdian shook her exquisite head. "They have perfected their plans for the immediate future—but we can be *the element of the unpredictable!*"

"You mean . . . you're not in sympathy with their plans? That you won't serve as a rallying point to sway the masses of Venus?" Carston looked bewildered. "I thought when I saw you, that was the reason they'd brought you here! We know that your people would revolt at a word from you, Princess! That's what our Government feared."

"I know. And I will not lead my people to an hecatomb in space. But neither will the Earth continue to exploit my planet and debauch my people. This time, there will be a peace and it will be equitable." Aladdian had drawn herself to a full four feet eleven inches, and there was an imperious note in her voice. Carston stood silent and grim.

MARK, looking at his Venusian friend anew, thought irrelevantly that, with the spike-heeled sandals of Earth, Aladdian would be only slightly under the average height of an Earth girl. He shook his head irritably. This was no time to ponder inconsequential things.

"Aladdian," he said, "do you know much of their plans and what is being done with this new metal?"

"Partly. We have discussed ways and means since my arrival here. George Marnik is very impatient; I think he fears he may die before he can see his plans carried through. First he will equip a fleet equal or superior to Earth's forces. Then he will take over Callisto, the new Gibraltar, between the inner and outer planets, after which he will complete an alliance with Venus and Mars. He does not plan to conquer Earth, he knows it would take years; but his scheme would bottle your planet, relegate it to the status of a minor power, without inter-planetary colonies, without outer revenues. Venus and Mars alone would expand in the Solar System."

"For a while," Mark said laconically. "Mars would never be content with anything short of complete rule, as long as Dar Vaajo lives! And the metal? . . ."

"It is smelted here under a secret

process, and parts for the space cruisers and special rockets manufactured. Then they are stored in one of the asteroids where they will be assembled later into a fleet. That is all the data I have now."

"But this Luhor," Mark asked, "what is his real status? Commander Cynthia seems to trust him implicitly."

"She does," Aladdian replied. "He's an old friend of George Marnik, one of his trusted lieutenants from the pirate days. But he's a cold devil—combines the worst from both Venusian and Martian. Don't under-estimate him . . . he can be deadly!"

"I've had occasion to see that," Mark said dryly.

"They're all deadly in this deadly little planet!" Carston said vehemently. He looked far older than his scant thirty years, his face was bleak and haggard.

"But this is heaven in comparison with the Prison Swamp," Aladdian told him coldly. She seemed to have a determined animosity toward the high-ranking Earth official.

"It wasn't I who sent you there!"

"No. It was only your relentless pursuit that eventually resulted in my capture," the Venusian answered, "and it was only you who cut the tendons of my wings. Oh, I know—you were only acting under orders."

Aladdian was smiling again as she turned back to Mark. "We had better all go back to our quarters now, but it would be best if we did not return together." She moved away, then added: "Watch Luhor, Mark; I am not sure, but I think he too is part of the 'unpredictable.'"

Mark watched her slim figure, with the azure wings and tight-curling, blue-black hair, melt away into the shadows.

"I will see you tomorrow," her voice floated back like a golden molten stream.

V

"ONLY twenty-two men, Luhor?" Commander Cynthia Marnik stood very straight and very slim in the center of the airlock, surveying the new men plus a sprinkling of others, preparatory to the trip outside. "Even less than the last trip!" Annoyance creased a frown between her blue eyes.

"All we can spare, Commander. Every available man's at the furnaces; your father has ordered it so." Turning to the waiting men, Luhor began to instruct them in the operation of their metal surface suits.

"As you can see, they're two suits in one," he explained tersely, "operating on the vacuum principle. Here's the cooling device between each metal sheathing. You'll have to bear more heat than you've ever endured, but don't get panicky. Here's where you regulate the oxygen flow into the helmet." He indicated a little dial.

Each man was assigned to a wide, flat-bottomed sled which he was to pull behind him. They were also equipped with curious, spur-like picks. Mark failed to understand the reason for such primitive methods, but remained discreetly silent.

"You men who have made the trip before, help the new arrivals," Luhor ordered curtly. Mark noted that Luhor himself was not going to accompany them, but Cynthia Marnik was already encased in her suit. Ernest Carston went over to help her adjust the helmet.

"I can manage quite all right, thank you," she said. But it did not escape Mark that her voice was soft and that she smiled at Carston. Carston came over to give Mark a hand. He smiled reassuringly through his helmet's visiplat, then flicking on Mark's radio-phone, said briefly:

"Stay close to me! I'm one of the veterans."

"Bring Vulc, we're about ready," the Commander's voice sounded startlingly inside Mark's headpiece.

"Who's Vulc?" Mark asked Carston in a whisper.

Before the latter could answer, there was a sudden unearthly rumbling behind them. Mark turned, stared, then froze in his tracks. A huge, awesome apparition was lumbering in a straight line for the Commander. It was vaguely human in that it possessed a head, torso, four limbs of elephantine proportions, and it waddled upright. But the human resemblance went no further.

The creature's skin, if skin it was, gleamed silvery metallic and gave the impression of being fluid! It reminded Mark

of nothing so much as an immense blob of mercury that might at any moment collapse into a puddle and spread over the floor.

But Vulc didn't collapse. He approached the Commander and stood docilely waiting. She patted the creature's arm and then landed him a package of something. Vulc rumbled his appreciation and poured the contents into a gash that appeared in his face. Then he waddled contentedly to a large sled and took up the reins.

"Wow! Where did you ever dig up *that*?" Mark turned white-faced to Carston.

"Vulc? He's a native of this planet, but more than that, he's our ambassador of peace!"

The Commander's crisp voice made further conversation impossible. "Single file, you men. Stay as close to each other as the sleds will permit. Carston, you stay in the middle, as usual, and watch out for the Blitzees. If you men work hard, we should be back within ten hours."

Silently the outer door of the lock slid open and the men began to file out, with the gigantic Vulc at the head. The brightness was intense, although they were on the planet's "dark side." Shimmering waves of heat danced before them over the flat terrain.

At the very end of the line Commander Cynthia kept pace with them.

"**W**HAT did you mean by 'ambassador of peace,' Carston?" Mark had purposefully fallen into line next to him.

"Adjust your radio-phone to its shortest distance communication," Carston directed him, "so it will be inaudible to anyone else." As Mark did so, Carston continued, "We couldn't get out the metal we're after, without Vulc. His home is on the Neutral strip where we're going—that part of the planet where the outward and sunward side meet. All of Vulc's kin are there, and they resent us. They have attacked us before. We bring Vulc as an evidence of friendly intentions; they have a speech of sorts, and Vulc's supposed to pacify them."

"What was it the Commander gave him before we left?"

"Powdered metal, filings, and tiny scraps from the factories. That's what's in those big sacks up there on Vulc's sled—a peace offering for his people."

"They subsist on metal!" Mark Denning was aghast.

"Everything on this planet does—that is, everything native to it. And they're impervious to heat, of course. If Vulc had not been captured by George Marnik almost immediately after it was born, it would never have been conditioned to the comparatively cool atmosphere of the Base."

In silence they trudged mile after mile, following the same line of black hills that housed their Base. Mark marvelled at how comfortable the vacuum suits were, but he knew the real heat hadn't started yet.

It came presently, as they veered further outward from the hills. The heat increased steadily and became more intense than anything Mark had ever experienced. Perspiration dripped stickily within his suit. He wanted to wipe his face but couldn't; he could only shake his head to keep the sweat from his eyes.

But there was no keeping the mirages from his eyes. In every direction the terrain rocked and rolled under huge undulating hazes of heat. Horizons leaped at him in wave after wave, and fled away again. The men ahead seemed to do fantastic dances.

They no longer trod on rock. The ground beneath was soft, white and leprous looking, powdery almost as dust. Mark felt it hot around his metal-clad ankles. Now he realized the reason for the flat-bottomed sleds. He knew, too, that a spaceship could never venture over here and get back safely; compasses and magniplates and everything else would go haywire. Peering ahead, he discerned Vulc's fantastic bulk which now had turned a glowing cherry red! He shuddered at the thought of what would happen to a man suddenly bereft of the protecting vacuum suit.

Out of the silence, a vast rumbling sound rose like magnified thunder. Mark saw Carston fumble with his radio-phone then peer all about into the haze.

"Blitzees coming!" he yelled into his instrument.

Everyone stopped. Mark followed Carston's line of sight, but he couldn't see a thing.

"Swarm coming from the left!" Carston yelled again.

The Commander moved hurriedly along the line. "Lie down everyone, face to the left! Upend your sleds and if you value your lives, stay behind them!"

For a second all was confusion as the men flung themselves to the powdery soil; then a metal barrier sprang up as the sleds came end to end. Still nothing could be seen.

SUDDENLY then they came. The air was blue from crackling sparks as dozens of the Blitzees struck the sleds with the impact of bullets. A sound like the humming of millions of hornets was in their ears, as the greater part of the swarm passed overhead. Mark had a confused vision of electric blue streaks that writhed and zig-zagged, landed and leaped again, propelling themselves blindly. As suddenly as it had come, the danger was over.

The men arose somewhat shakily. The ground about them was strewn with the snake-like Blitzees. Mark picked one up and found it to be metallic, about five inches in length, transparent blue in color. The head was triangular, eyeless; along its back Mark felt a thin, wiry sort of filament!

"They're like living bolts of electricity," Carston told him, "They seem to short-circuit themselves when they strike the sleds." The caravan continued.

Hours later they arrived at their destination, a small rise in the terrain before them, covered with glittering crystals in huge, boulder-like lumps. The sides of the little hill was composed of the same ore, apparently in limitless amount.

But as if guarding it against them, rows of reddi-glowing Vulcs stood motionless, elephantine, facing them. Mark couldn't tell whether they were friendly or hostile. To him there was no expression to be seen on those fluid heads. But Commander Cynthia's Vulc went over to his henchmen and jabbered in rumbling noises, pointing to the huge sacks on his own sled. Presently three of the Vulcs came over and snatched at the sacks, opened

them and grabbed handfuls of the metallic filings. Seemingly satisfied, the trio lumbered off followed by the rest, bearing the sacks.

The men began to work then, loading the ore on the sleds and breaking it with their small hand-picks. Even to have come here was bad enough, and to breathe was an agony—but to work, in this inferno of unimaginable heat and blinding glare, was a nightmare. More than once Mark felt himself sway, and stood quite still until the dizziness passed. One of the men pitched forward and lay still.

Commander Cynthia examined the fallen man. She gestured to Vulc who grasped him and stretched him over the ore in his own sled. The Commander's face was drawn and white through the visiplat, and her eyes were tragic. Mark was seeing evidences today that she was not entirely cold and heartless, as he had at first thought.

It seemed an eternity before they were through with their task. At last the sleds were loaded to capacity, and they rested a while before starting the return journey.

They could only pull the heavy sleds slowly now, and only the knowledge that every mile brought them nearer to the Base, away from this suffocating hell, spurred them on.

After a while the Commander called a halt, and the men sank down against their sleds like puppets whose strings have been cut. There was a strange absence of curses and rebellion against the appalling experience they were undergoing; there was not enough strength left for that.

Then Mark saw Commander Cynthia suddenly stand up. Through the visiplat her eyes were wide, and they mirrored horror!

VI

"UP on your feet, every man of you! Test your oxygen tanks—quickly!" Her voice was tense with suppressed emotion.

Something in her tone seemed to cut a path through the heat-ridden lethargy of their minds, for the men staggered to their feet, hands fumbling for the test-ing buttons.

Mark found his, and his eyes darted to the tiny dial inside his helmet. The pointer swung and registered *one hour*. Frantically he pressed the button again; once more the pointer inexorably indicated the same period of time.

"One hour!" he breathed, stunned. That was barely a third of the time it would take to return to the Base! Out of the dancing mirage before him the alabaster face of Aladdian seemed to float and smile. With infinite, pain-laden regret Mark realized that unless a miracle happened he would never see her again, and now for the first time it dawned on him how much he wanted to.

Around him the men were milling in confusion, panic-stricken. Their few hours' stay at the Base had been like a brief taste of heaven, and life had become precious once more.

"All of us can't get back," the Commander was saying. "But there's enough oxygen among us to permit seven, at most eight, to do so. I'm willing to draw lots with the rest of you. But decide quickly! Every instant is precious!"

"No!" a man screamed hysterically, near the breaking point. "I'd rather take my chances. . . ." His voice ended in a hoarse sob.

Then a strange thing happened. Ernest Carston, white-faced and unsteady, stepped forward.

"You can take my supply, Commander Cynthia," he offered. "You need not draw lots; let the men do that."

She waved him aside and shook her head, but her eyes softened gratefully. She glanced at the teletimer at her wrist. "I will give you men just thirty seconds to make your decision; otherwise I will be forced to make it."

But from the group came no decision, only sullen argument and frantic babbling. Some of them measured the distance between them and the girl, eying hungrily the atom-blast guns at either side of her wrist.

"What a woman!" Carston murmured to himself, lost in admiration. But Mark heard him.

"Yes, she is magnificent," he agreed in a dry croak. "A pity all that courage and . . ." He checked himself and fell dully silent again.

It was then that Mark saw something or thought he did, far away, shimmering through the dancing heat. He wiped the sparkling dust from his visiplat and strained his eyes desperately, praying that it was not a mirage. He clutched at Carston and pointed.

"The hills . . . are those the hills? *Our hills?*"

Carston nodded dumbly. At last he managed to croak, "Yes, but the entrance is miles away . . . at the other end."

"But there may be a chance! Remember Aladdian, the corridors—a honeycomb of caverns? Commander!" Mark turned up his radio-phone, his voice drowning out the babble of the men. "How far is that range of hills, Commander?"

She followed his pointing arm. "A little less than an hour, at its closest point."

"And the system of caverns—how far does it extend? Aren't those hills practically honeycombed their entire length? We might find—"

"Wait!" The word came explosively, as her mind darted into the past, down the corridor of years. "Yes, I remember . . . some of the caverns did lead out to this side, and father sealed them to make the Base airtight. . . ." She gazed at the distant hills as if trying to recapture a forgotten scene. And a bulky shape hurtled forward, clawing for the weapons at her waist.

But Carston had been watching. He thrust out a metal-shod foot and the convict went sprawling ludicrously into the swirling white dust.

"Thank you, again!" the Commander said in a whisper. "This trip has been a revelation—in so many ways." Her face was as white as the powdery soil underfoot, and she was near collapse; but from some unknown source she still drew from enough strength reserve to maintain her authority. Hands on her atom-blast guns, she faced the men.

"Into line as before. We've got to make the hills in less than one hour. Leave the sleds. It's the hills or your lives!"

The effect was miraculous. Suddenly they were docile, grasping at the slender hope she offered them and content to have her bear the burden. Quickly they

fell into line, with Vulc leading the way again. The men needed no urging; the knowledge that they only had one more hour of oxygen was enough.

IF their trek up to now had been a nightmare, this latter stage surpassed even the most secret refinements of a Martian torture-chamber. In an agony of slowness the minutes lengthened and seemed to stand still. The low range of hills seemed to dance mockingly and recede into the distance beyond the horizon's endless rim. In addition now to the heat in their brains and the glare in their eyes, their lungs were tortured as they regulated the oxygen intake-valves to the barest minimum.

After an eternity in which even memory seemed to have fled, they were walking on rock and the heat began imperceptibly to abate. Directly before them, the hills rose out of the torturing blaze. Cries that were little more than miserable croakings echoed through the radio-phones as the men broke ranks; they staggered on, holding to each other for support.

Mark looked around for the Commander, and saw her clutching at Carston's shoulder for support, while his arm was about her waist, half-holding her up. The girl disengaged herself and by sheer will-power drove toward the base of the low-lying cliffs before them.

"Wait!" she ordered.

She stopped, and the men halted behind her, weaving on their feet. She stared around us as if desperately trying to recall something deeply imbedded in the matrix of the past; then she veered to the right, waving for Vulc and the men to follow.

Mark tested his oxygen tank and glanced at the dial again. It read "ten minutes." It was a race with time which now, perversely, seemed to be rushing by on flying feet.

Thirty yards further, the cliffs curved in sharply. Rounding it, the Commander gave a glad cry. In the center was a gigantic metal door, hermetically sealing what had once been the entrance to a cave. The men staggered forward, some of them clawing feebly at the barrier. Others sank wordlessly to the rocky ground. They weren't even sure that

beyond that metal wall they would find life-giving air.

The Commander had drawn both atom-pistols, and stood there surveying the barrier as if paralyzed.

"What are you waiting for?" Mark pressed forward. "In minutes, the men will be dying! Blast an opening!"

For the very first time, Mark saw her hesitant, indecisive, as if unable to think. "But the air. . . ." she managed to gasp. "It will escape from the caves, clear back to the Base! All those men there . . . and father . . . their lives are more important than ours!"

IN those brief seconds Mark admired her. Despite the deadly threat to the Earth she embodied, he admired her for her humanity and loyalty to the men at the Base. But there was no time to lose. He made her decision superfluous.

"We've got to chance it!" With a swift, darting movement he wrested an atom-blast gun from her hand and discharged it steadily at the metal door, at a point just above the ground. A second later she was helping him with the other gun. Instantly the metal turned fiery red, then white, and finally a circular section fell outward with a hissing rush of air.

"Dive in, men!" With the dregs of a strength he didn't know he still possessed, Mark grasped the men and pushed them toward the aperture, helped shove them through. "Throw your helmets back!" he shouted. "In you go," he told the Commander, and despite her protests he lifted her off her feet, almost handing her through the blasted entrance.

Only Vulc and Mark were left. As the Earthman crawled through, he motioned for Vulc to follow. The metallic being dropped to all fours and pushed in his arms, his head, his massive shoulders. His sides scraped the still hot edges of the aperture. And there he stuck. The men inside grasped his arms and pulled, but in vain. Vulc gazed ludicrously from side to side and heaved prodigiously, but in vain. The Vulcanian seemed molded to the hole.

"Wait! Tell him not to struggle, not to move!" Mark was exultant as he turned to the girl. "The air's no longer rushing away; if he'll only remain there until

we can get back with equipment to seal that hole, the danger's over!"

Vulc seemed to be pondering; his limbs sprawled like a distorted swastika, and on his usually blank, fluid face was something like surprise. In the dim recesses of his alien mind he could find no parallel to this.

The Commander spoke to him slowly, with desperate emphasis; reaching into a pocket of her suit, she brought out another package of powdered metal which Vulc promptly stuffed into his mouth. "He understands," she said at last. "But I'll leave one of you here with him, to be certain he does."

For a while they rested, lying prone, helmets thrown back, luxuriating in the comparative coolness and the draughts of pure air. All were thirsty, their throats parched and aching. But the nightmare was over. Presently the Commander rose to her feet and gave the order to march. She was almost her usual self again, detached, impersonal. But she was white to the lips and her eyes were electric as she said:

"Luhor will pay for this!"

She barely breathed it, but Mark heard her. And he knew what she meant. It was Luhor who had prepared the units of oxygen for the suits.

VII

UNDER the dim illumination maintained even as far as these outlying caves, the group went grimly on. Their passage through the tortuous corridors was dotted by discarded vacuum suits. But no echoes drifted back to them from the activity of the Base.

Twice they lost their way, ending up against blank rock walls and retracing their steps. But at last the inter-connecting tunnel chain became familiar to the Commander.

"She blames Luhor for the oxygen business!" Mark murmured to Carston walking beside him.

"Should!" Carston exclaimed laconically, grimly. "Aladdian warned us against Luhor, remember? There'll be hell to pay when we get back! Any monkey-wrench thrown into the machinery of their plans, helps the Earth. I hope. . . ."

He broke off, staring moodily ahead.

"She's far more human than you think," Mark Denning said softly.

"Yes, I noticed that today." Carston's voice sounded glad. "It's only the Spartan training she learned while cruising the spacelanes with her piratical father that keeps her up—that, and the old man's insane will, driving her on through a sense of loyalty to him."

They were so near to the Base now that Mark expected momentarily to hear the clang of metal in the factories, the voices of workmen. His heart quickened at the thought of seeing Aladdian, and he forgot his weariness in embroidering upon that thought.

But the ominous stillness remained unbroken.

They entered the final corridor leading to the vast central chamber. The Commander ran forward, with the anxious men close behind her. They entered the grotto. The subterranean Base extended into the distance before their startled, unbelieving eyes.

"What—" Cynthia began bewilderedly.

It was a dead city, soundless and inert. Under the distant cavern roof it had the air of a ghost town drained of all life.

Mark's heart leaped into his mouth. "Aladdian!" he cried involuntarily, and his hands clenched in an agony of anxiety of helpless rage.

Commander Cynthia was already running toward the palace, a deathly fear mirrored in her eyes.

The men had stopped uncertainly, too weary and exhausted to understand. Then driven by a single thought, they staggered off to their building in search of water and food.

Scarcely had the echoes of Mark's cry stopped reverberating, when from the shadows of a transverse corridor emerged the elfin figure of the Venusian.

Aladdian gazed at Mark as if he had returned from the dead. She closed her eyes, swayed a little. Mark caught her in his arms. He too was silent. No words would serve.

"To the palace!" she finally breathed, gently disengaging herself. Followed by Carston, they hurried to the imposing building where old George Marnik reigned. Aladdian led them swiftly through the

panelled outer hall, through the magnificent salon where the loot from many years was a fabulous welter of wealth. Mark had no eyes for it now. They did not stop until they reached the inner chambers and finally came to George Marnik's room, where no one but Cynthia was ever permitted.

LYING grotesquely twisted on the priceless Martian tapestry that covered the bed, the ancient pirate was dead. Cynthia Marnik was kneeling beside him, weeping softly. There was no doubt as to the manner of his death. The pencil-thin opening through his temple could only have been done by an atom-blast.

"Luhor," Aladdian said, indicating the wound with a gesture.

They withdrew, leaving Cynthia alone with her grief. The two men followed the Venusian girl to the immense palace dining-room. With her own hands she served them food and drink, asking no questions, uttering no words until their vast hunger and thirst were appeased. Then she sat down.

"And so," she began without preamble, "the unpredictable has entered." At their rush of questions she held up a hand. "Let me explain," she begged. "I can do it briefly if you are silent. After you left, Luhor ordered every man here to go aboard the Spacer. He blasted down two or three who refused; you will find them in the air-lock. Previous to that, I heard him arguing with George Marnik. He atom-blasted Marnik from behind. I know, because I deliberately contacted his mind, although the effort nearly drove me mad; it is not easy for us to tune to an alien intellect, but Luhor being partly Venusian helped."

"The miracle is that he didn't take you with him," Carston ventured. "You were too valuable to leave behind!"

"When we came here yesterday," she said simply, "I studied the plans of these caverns. When I learned what was in Luhor's mind, I hid in a maze of abandoned corridors. They searched for me a while, but since he plans to return, he gave up the search for the present. He had no time to waste! The Patrol has been to the Prison Swamp; failing to find either of you, and learning of my dis-

appearance, *Earth has mobilized its fleet!*"

"How—how do you know this?" Both men leaned tensely forward.

"Through the ethero-magnum George Marnik has in his laboratory here—the most powerful receiving and transmission instrument I've ever seen, greater even than the ethero-magnum we have on Venus!"

"So *that's* how he kept always a step ahead of the Patrol," Carston mused. "The scientists he used to kidnap from space-liners—he must have forced them to perfect scientific inventions here!"

"Yes," the Venusian girl nodded, "but I haven't told you the most important part, Luhor's plan. If he succeeds, there will be no peace. He has taken the men to the asteroid where Marnik's new fleet of space vessels are to be assembled. But worse than that—they are also to fit *gigantic rockets to the asteroid itself!* It is very dense, and greatly pitted, which simplifies things. With the rockets of this new metal he can guide the asteroid's course! It will be the terror of space, literally invulnerable, with banks of immense electro-cannon and atom-blasts, and cradling a swarm of the new Spacers!"

Ernest Carston could only hold his head in his hands. Earth's greatest enemy had died in Marnik, but a greater, more ruthless one had arisen in Luhor!

"Go on, Aladdian, please," Mark's tones were reassuring.

"Luhor does not suspect that I contacted his mind. He believes all of you have died in the wastes—I got that from his mind, too. Since he will return, because Vulcan's to be the seat of his empire, and he wants me, we have time to plan how we are going to receive him. He's persuaded that the only living being on Vulcan now is a defenseless girl." She smiled enigmatically.

"But that asteroid! That hellish threat to Earth!" Carston was beside himself.

"And to Venus, and Mars," Aladdian reminded him gently. "It will take months for those rockets to be installed, Earthman. He will be here long before that, I am certain of it—as only a woman can be certain." She raised her eyes and gazed at the doorway.

FRAMED at the entrance to the dining-room, Cynthia Marnik stood looking somberly and dry-eyed. Aladdian rose swiftly and went over to her.

"My dear. . . ." the Venusian said softly, a world of compassion in her voice. Cynthia smiled wanly and took the tumbler of water that Carston extended to her. She drank dazedly and then sat down with the inexpressible weariness of one whose world has come tumbling down about her head. Aladdian darted to the kitchen and upon returning made the Earth girl drink a cup of concentrate, then led her away, to her bedroom. "You must sleep," Aladdian was saying softly, monotonously, with a hypnotic cadence in her voice.

"I wonder if it will be safe to arm the men?" Carston questioned thoughtfully, his mind grappling with the problem.

"That's a chance we'll have to take," Mark Denning replied. "A few among them are not really hardened criminals, but are *politicians*, as you know. I think they will all fight for us, provided we can offer them freedom when, and if, we win."

"I can make them no promises not sanctioned by the Earth Council," Carston said stiffly. "Remember, their lives are forfeit!"

"And so will ours be, if you don't snap out of that single-track rut in which you've grooved your brain!" Mark exclaimed acidly. "Council or no Council, the Earth, Venus, Mars and the colonies must be saved! This is no time to quibble about ethics. A hell of a lot will be left of your Council if we don't stop Luhor!"

"You startle me some times, Mark Denning. You do not sound as a true servant of the Earth State!"

"Because to you," Mark said slowly, "the State is the few decrepit members calling themselves the Council, and the top-heavy Government of Earth. But to me, the 'State' are the millions and billions of human beings whose destinies are ruled by a self-appointed few, and who are now facing even a worse slavery if we don't succeed in being what Aladdian calls 'the unpredictable!'"

Carston's face flushed with anger. He drew himself to his full height as he said, "I represent the Government of

Earth, which rules the Planets—and I am your superior officer!”

“You’re wrong!” Mark Denning countered, rising too. “I’m a free agent as of this moment, and recognize no superior. I’ll not be hamstrung by rules and regulations which can’t serve us now, Carston!”

“No need to quarrel,” Aladdian spoke placidly from the doorway where, unnoticed, she had been listening. “Because only I and Cynthia can make terms with Earth, if we survive.”

“You and Commander Cynthia?” Carston exclaimed. “Both of your lives have been forfeit. I doubt if the Council will be willing to listen to any terms coming from *you*.”

Mark Denning’s face was stained by a dull flush, and he took a step forward; but Aladdian laid her hand lightly on his arm and stopped him.

“The Colonel belongs to the old order,” she said very softly, “it is difficult for him to adjust himself to a changing universe. But this time it is beyond his control.”

“Why?” Carston uttered the word grimly.

“Because through the ethero-magnum I have already warned Venus and Mars. My planet is being mobilized. Mars will soon take the necessary steps. But the most important reason of all, is that Earth has no means of landing a fleet on Vulcan, does not know the location of Luhor’s asteroid, and *does not even suspect the existence of the new allotropic metal.*”

Carston looked baffled as the Venusian girl spoke, then turned to Mark Denning with the expression of a man who for once felt hopelessly lost.

“I can promise the men who aid us a fortune to each,” Aladdian continued, “and the leisure to spend it—on *Venus*. As for the Earth,” she said thoughtfully—“only Commander Cynthia and I know the formula for the new metal, and the location of the asteroid!”

“I WILL talk to the men!” Mark said with a finality that left no doubt. “Let them rest for a few hours, then I’ll see to it that they’re on our side. I know how to rouse them. Wait until they learn

that Luhor short-changed them on oxygen! How much backing can you expect from Venus, Aladdian?”

“To the last man,” she said quietly. “They have already seen me through the ethero-magnum, and heard my story. I intercepted the Tri-Planetary Beam as the Earth broadcast, and transmitted our beam along their channel. By the time Earth’s Government set out their interceptor to neutralize my beam, it was already too late; the three planets are seething!”

“And Luhor? Wouldn’t he have picked up your beam on the Spacer and heard you?”

Aladdian shrugged. “He knows I’m here. The confusion created by my broadcast only served to aid his plans for the moment. He has nothing to fear, as far as he knows. A war between the planets would only make his conquest simpler.”

“And knowing that,” Carston spoke bitterly, “you still broadcast your story and let your image be seen! Do you suppose Venus will ever be content now with anything short of war?”

“Yes, I do. We are intelligent beings, not Martian atavisms, nor do we have your Earth’s insane will to *Power*. We only want peace and with it freedom. But the game is ruthless, Carston, the universe is the stake!” Aladdian turned to leave.

“Mark,” she said gently from the doorway, “Cynthia can show you where the arsenal is located; you’ll find every imaginable weapon. Also, you had better study the combination that opens the air-locks, and the synchronized degravitators. I suspect that Luhor will be back here soon—*very soon.*”

Suddenly the terrific reaction of that day hit Mark with sickening impact. He was hardly able to rise to his feet. Carston was slumped over the table; Mark went over and shook him gently, and somehow aided the older man to his feet. Together they went into the fabulously furnished salon, and unable to go any further, threw themselves on couches piled with priceless rugs and embroidered scarves from the various planets. Carston instantly was asleep.

Despite his utter weariness, Mark slept fitfully, awakening and dropping back to

sleep as the hours passed in their eternal caravan. Something clamored at the back of his brain, something he had forgotten because of the major crisis they'd had to confront on their return to the Base.

And suddenly he sat upright. The overhead lights had automatically dimmed, no one was stirring. With a shock, Mark had remembered Vulc and the man they had left to watch him! He leaped to his feet, aching in every bone, and ran to the building where the men were quartered.

"If Vulc gets tired of waiting and wriggles through that hole! . . ." He tried not to think of the rest.

He burst into the building and roused the men. "Up, on your feet, there's no time to waste!" His terrible urgency instilled them with a nameless fear, prodding them as nothing else would have done.

"Your lives are at stake," he told them bluntly, and reminded them of Vulc. "At any moment he might decide he's waited long enough. Who among you knows how to repair that breach?"

Three of the men came forward. "All right," Mark told them, "hurry to the shops and get what instruments and materials you need—but hurry!"

THE men could not return to sleep now, knowing that at any moment the Base's life-giving air might go rushing away. This emergency, following so close upon the other hardships of the day, seemed too much. Mark saw that they were all very near the breaking point. Now was the psychological moment to speak to them, and by giving them the entire picture, lift them above the present crisis as well as inspire them with hope for the future.

Calmly he told of Luhor's treachery in giving them a short oxygen supply, with the intention of murdering them all. Deliberately, with calculated phrases, he aroused their hatred and thirst for revenge.

Mark paused, letting it sink in, giving time for their dark passions to reach a peak. Then he told of Luhor's asteroid, and the threat to the planets. He dangled before their eyes the promise of untold wealth, and freedom on Venus for the

rest of their lives. To give his promises authority and weight, he made no bones about the fact that he was a high operative of the Tri-Planetary Bureau of Prisons—but he climaxed it with the guarantee of a blanket pardon from the Earth Council itself.

"You will see and hear the Council on the ethero-magnum, but we shall be making the terms," Mark Denning said forcefully. "There's no trick in this, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose! In the Swamp, your lives were forfeit; they were forfeit here on Vulcan too. I promise you wealth on Venus, and the freedom you'll never have any other way! Who's with me?"

He need not have asked, for the clamor that answered him was affirmative and unanimous. Gone for the moment was their fatigue, as they embroidered upon the possibilities of the days to come.

Not until the trio returned from repairing the breach, bringing Vulc with them, did the men return to their sleep with the first and only hope they had had in years. Only Mark Denning realized the trials to come. These few men had been won over easily. Not so easy would be the negotiated terms with Earth. The Earth Government had won its dominance over the System the hard way, only after a bitter ten-years' inter-planetary war, and it would not easily relinquish its position.

VIII

THE days that followed were eternities to the little group left stranded on Vulcan Base. Nerves were taut and tempers were short. Every man there, as well as the two women, realized that their very lives as well as the fate of the System depended on the day of Luhor's return from the asteroid.

Mark had aroused the men too well. They were impatient and restless. They didn't want their freedom handed to them on a silver platter, they wanted to fight for it. Aladdian had said Luhor would be back soon—very soon. Mark questioned her about it.

"Even with that fast Spacer," Aladdian replied, "it will take him several days to get out to that asteroid and back again. Cynthia tells me her father sent a

crew of men there a month ago, to assemble the new Spacers. Luhor will undoubtedly win them all to his side, and bring half of them back to continue the work here. Cynthia says—"

"Cynthia seems to have confided a lot in you!" Mark exclaimed with a sudden, unexplainable suspicion.

Aladdian smiled wearily, and slowly shook her head. "You are demoted back to the lower order, Mark Denning," she said with a hint of the same mockery Mark had known in the Swamp. "Cynthia Marnik needs our help now. She only carried out her father's orders, but now that the dynasty is crumbling about her ears, she's bewildered and a little frightened. Something else has happened to her too, for the first time in her life."

"What's that?"

"Never mind," Aladdian said enigmatically. "Ernest Carston knows. It will turn out all right. Meanwhile you had better put the men here to work, it will help pass the time. Goodbye . . . Mark." Like an azure-winged elf she hurried back to the laboratory where she spent most of her time.

That was the first instance Mark could remember when Aladdian had called him by his first name, and he liked it.

He called the men together and assigned them to posts at the furnaces, where they continued to turn out the metal that would be fashioned into the super rocket-tubes. Earth was massing its fleet and Venus was mobilizing. Mark realized that if a truce could not be called, they would need every one of the outlaw Spacers on the asteroid, and others as well. He took a few of the men with him to the arsenal, where they began to get every available weapon in readiness for the Tri-Planetary showdown that was sure to come.

"TELL the men to stop work," Aladdian said to Mark two days later, "then bring them to the laboratory. They have as much right as we to know what is happening. I have been working on the ethero-magnum sender, and I shall try to contact both Venus and Earth."

They gathered in the magnificent laboratory George Marnik had erected. Here, various machines were arranged

in preponderant array, but all were dwarfed by the imposing ethero-magnum in the center of the room. Hidden atomomotors hummed a smooth and powerful threnody. The control panel, as tall as Aladdian herself, connected to huge coils of radical design which themselves led to the televisé, a huge sensitized sheet of metal reaching clear up to the ceiling.

Carston, an Earth patriot to the end, watched these activities with misgivings. But he was silent, curiously so, and Mark wondered at it.

Mark was soon to know the reason for Carston's silence, and to realize that the Earth official did not give up so easily. . . .

"I want you all to stand back against the walls," Aladdian said, "out of range of the televisé. Luhor may pick this up, and he must not know there is anyone here but me."

She operated the dials quickly, surely, with tendril-like fingers. A faint, far away voice was heard droning monotonously. "Earth is sending to Venus now," Aladdian said, never once removing her gaze from the dancing dials before her. "If I can intercept the Earth beam, I can get my message to Venus through that channel, by drowning them out. I did it once before."

The sound of the voice increased, and words became distinguishable. They were haranguing, dictatorial—undoubtedly one of the Earth Council speaking to Venus. At the same time the huge metallic sheet above Aladdian's head took on a silvery glow, and a wavering scene began to appear. The scene was a crowded city square, with thousands of faces upturned to a televisé screen atop one of the buildings.

"That is N'Vaarl, Capitol City of Venus," Aladdian murmured. "They are listening to the Earth broadcast. Now I will let them see me." Automatically her hand reached out, and grasped a lever which she threw downward. The atomomotors shrieked as they absorbed the increased power, and soon the sound rose above the audible. At the same time the Earth voice was drowned out, and the scene at N'Vaarl became very clear to the watchers in the room.

On the huge public televisé screen at N'Vaarl, the image of Aladdian, Prin-

cess of Venus and daughter of Bedrim the Liberator, became visible. The crowd did not cheer, but awaited her message, knowing that at any moment the Earth would throw off the beam when it realized what was happening.

"Greetings, my people!" Aladdian spoke quickly. "As I told you before, Earth is mobilizing its fleet and I know that you are preparing for any contingency. That is well, but I entreat you not to act in any manner until you have heard further from me! There is a greater danger than that of Earth! I am safe and well, I cannot come to you now, but soon—"

IN that moment the Earth beam ceased, and the scene on the televisé blanked out. Aladdian turned with a satisfied smile to Mark and Cynthia and the others. "It is enough that they saw me. My people will not act now without word from me. I hope I shall never have to give that word."

"Aladdian," Mark spoke worriedly, "isn't it a risk for you to broadcast at all? The Earth Government doesn't know your present whereabouts, but if they were to send out tracer beams and learn you were operating from Vulcan . . . well, it's true that no Patrol ship is equipped to land on Vulcan, but they could bottle us up here—"

Ernest Carston, who had been silent but eternally watchful, became suddenly tense at Mark's words.

"They *have* sent out tracer beams," Aladdian replied, "but with this instrument I can neutralize them all." Fondly she touched the ethero-magnum by her side. "Anyway, the immediate danger is not from Earth, but from Luhor. Let us not forget that! And I must warn Earth, must make them understand."

She turned to the dialed panel again, and even as her fingers made swift connections, she continued to speak. "It may not be easy to establish a direct channel from here to Earth, but I think I have completed a new trans-telector beam on which George Marnik was working. It should do away with the magnetic disturbance caused by our close proximity to the sun. We shall see."

Again the atomo-motors whined and ascended the scale. This time, there was a new exultant note. Minutes passed, then

the overhead screen began to take on a hazy, shifting blur. Aladdian's fingers moved unerringly on the dials. The blur came suddenly, sharply into focus.

Carston, standing against the far wall next to Mark Denning, leaned tensely forward, his eyes aglow. The scene on the televisé was the Earth Council. Carston almost leaped forward in his excitement, but Mark gripped his arm tightly.

Aladdian was speaking to the Council. In slow, matter-of-fact tones she told of George Marnik, of the new metal, of Luhor and Luhor's plans. She told of the asteroid and the fleet being assembled there, without revealing the asteroid's position. She described the properties of the new metal but was careful not to hint of its source.

"I seek to warn you," Aladdian's voice came fervent and clear. "You are plunging into disaster. It is not my people I think of now, but the Tri-Planet Federation! If you continue to mobilize your fleet I am not sure I can control the Irreconcilables among my people—I certainly cannot control Dar Vaajo of Mars, who is headstrong beyond reason. It will mean an hecatomb in space, with Luhor holding his asteroid in readiness for the final blow!"

"This Luhor and the formidable asteroid of which you speak," came the cold, sneering voice of the Earth Co-ordinator. "Tell us more of them. Give us the location of the asteroid."

Aladdian hesitated for an instant. "No. That I cannot do."

"You cannot, because no such asteroid and no such metal exists! You would try to frighten us with this story of a demon asteroid and a super space fleet! It would not be that you seek to gain time for your people to rally to you, now that they know you have escaped the Prison Swamp? Or perhaps you need time in which to co-ordinate your resources with those of Dar Vaajo of Mars! Let us advise you, Aladdian, that within a week the main body of our fleet will be at Venus, and it will not go well with your Irreconcilables. We shall know how to handle them this time, we shall not be so lenient as before! Perhaps, in order to spare them, you will wish to give yourself up to us, daughter of Bedrim!"

Aladdian's slender body grew taut as though struck by a whip lash. With a single sweep of the control lever she cut off the beam. Dazedly she crossed the room, oblivious to the murmurs of the others; her usually alabaster face was now chalk white beneath her curling blue-black hair, her lips were pressed tight but they trembled nevertheless.

At the laboratory door Mark caught her arm, walked beside her. "Aladdian," he choked. "I—"

She became aware of him then, smiled up at him through her bitterness.

"Aladdian, I am—I just wanted to say—I'm sorry I'm an Earthman!"

She stopped suddenly, faced him, took one of his hands in both of hers. "No, Mark! Do not say that, do not ever say it. For you are more than that . . . much more. . . ."

IX

IT was night, and the overhead lights in the corridors were dimmed. Ernest Carston tossed restlessly in his bed. He could not sleep, he had been unable to sleep since seeing and hearing the Earth Council on the ethero-magnum.

Carston arose, and dressed quickly. Silently he crossed the room to the outer door, and stepped out into the corridor. He paced slowly, aimlessly, his brow knit in deep thought. Finally he made a decision, and turned his footsteps in the direction of the palace and the laboratory. He was still an Earth official; he had known all the time that he would have to take matters here into his own hands.

Before he reached the corridor leading to the laboratory, however, he heard the soft shuffle of footsteps. Carston leaped back into the shadows just as a lone figure emerged from one of the transverse corridors. It passed very close to him, and he saw that it was Cynthia Marnik; her face seemed very white, and her steps were hurried.

Carston's heart quickened a pace, as he followed her at a safe distance, keeping to the shadows. She continued along the main corridor, past the men's quarters and past the furnaces. With a shock, Carston realized she was heading for the outer air-lock.

He reached there in time to see the huge door slide open, then Cynthia stepped through, and the door closed. Carston waited, giving her time to leave the tunnel, before he followed. Finally he entered the tunnel himself, having long since learned how to operate the mechanism of these doors. Cynthia was gone; the outer doors were closed.

Carston hurried down the long tunnel. The magnetic degravitizing coils along each side were silent now, would remain so until the Spacer's return. Carston reached the racks of vacuum suits near the outer door, quickly donned one and was soon outside the Base.

Against the sun-swept horizon, a hundred yards away, he could easily discern Cynthia's metal-encased figure. She kept close to the shadows at the foot of the low lying cliffs. Not once did she look back. A quarter of a mile further, she turned sharply, entered a narrow, steep-walled canyon.

Puzzled, Carston hurried forward. He reached the canyon and entered it, realizing that this must be one of the few places on Vulcan's surface where there was anything simulating night; it wasn't really dark, but sort of a twilight gloom between the rock cliffs sheering upward.

And he saw Cynthia. She hadn't gone far. Her vacuum-suited figure stood very still, and she seemed to be staring up at the immensity of space. Carston crept closer, came very near indeed, until he could see the profiled whiteness of her face beneath the helmet.

Carston stared too, following her gaze. At first he didn't see a thing. Then, high on the horizon, out of the sun's glare, right between the canyon walls . . . he caught the bright blue glint of a star. He suddenly realized what it was, and with a sharp intake of breath he whispered: "Earth!"

SHE must have had her helmet phones on. She turned slowly to face him, and Carston was startled at the clear-cut radiance of her face.

"It's the Earth, yes . . . it's beautiful. There's no other place on this planet where you can see it like that, and then only when the position is right. Sometimes not for months. . . ."

Carston stepped quickly to her side. Cynthia averted her face, but not before he saw the glint of tears in her eyes, and the lengthening glimmer of one that rolled down her cheek beneath the transparent helmet.

For an instant, Carston was dumbfounded. Then a vast exultation surged within him. "I knew it!" he whispered fiercely. "Almost from the first moment I saw you, I sensed there was something artificial beneath your mask of hardness. This is it! You don't hate Earth at all, Cynthia, you've never hated it!"

"Yes," she spoke softly, her voice deepening. "I've never hated Earth. It was only father—" Abruptly she stopped, and her gaze strayed to where the blue star shone like an aquamarine ablaze. "I can't remember clearly; it's like a vague dream—but I have a dim vision of green fields and golden light, and clouds in an unreal blue sky; and trees beside a wide lake, with a crisp tang of air, different from the air here. To me, that's Earth. I was born there." Her voice faded, and as if from a great distance Carston heard her say, "Oh perhaps it's just a dream."

"No, it's not a dream," Carston whispered, standing very close to her now. "It's part of you, it belongs to you! All Earthians feel that out here, a yearning to get back. Cynthia, I've loved you from the very first . . . didn't you know? Let me take you back with me, out of this madness that can only mean death for us all!" He stopped, at the sight of her upturned face, white and wan.

"I guessed. Yes, I know. I've been waiting a long time to hear you say this. And I'd go with you, Carston, but how is it possible now? My life's forfeit, you yourself said so!"

Now Carston was very sure of himself. "No, my dear," he said softly, trying to filter the triumph from his voice. "Your life's not forfeit if you help prevent the carnage and destruction that Aladdian's mad dream will bring about. She doesn't know, she *can't* know the awful power of Earth's fleet. Luhor's vaunted super-cruisers will be so many leaves scattered in the void. This allotropic metal on which his hope of invincibility is based, can be neutralized and destroyed!"

"But how? What can we do?" Cynthia's voice held a note of despair, as her hand unconsciously went out to his.

"We can give Earth the location of Luhor's asteroid, and the secret of Vulcan!" He said it so softly, so insinuatingly that it was little more than a thought. "I can promise you an absolute pardon, my dear—more! I can promise you honor for aiding Earth. The Council knows how to reward, as it knows how to punish."

"But Aladdian and Mark? Would it not mean death, or worse, for them both?" She shuddered, as a vision of the Swamp came before her eyes. "I could never condemn them to that," she thought aloud.

"With my influence, I can get amnesty for them—leniency at least," Carston said with the glibness of one to whom nothing mattered but the ultimate task that must be accomplished at all costs. "All Earth wants is to avoid another war. If we make it possible for Earth's fleet to capture Luhor and neutralize the asteroid, I'm certain the Council will pardon Aladdian and Mark." He pressed her hand confidently in both of his.

She seemed to hesitate, but Carston knew she had already made up her mind. "If you're sure you can obtain the pardon—and stop this senseless war—yes—yes, my dear, I'll give the Earth Council any information you wish—"

Her voice dwindled and stopped as Carston took her into his arms. He, himself, was white and trembling with the reaction of having accomplished his task. Over her shoulder he could see the twinkling blue dot of Earth. He smiled, and it was a very smug smile. His breath was long and trembling, but his intense emotion at the moment was *not* akin to love.

X

"SOON, now."

Carston's murmur echoed eerily against the shrill hum of the atomomotors in the upper scales. The phantasmal glow of the selector screens suffused the chamber. Selenic cells poured additional power into the trans-selector beam as Cynthia's fingers trembled over the shining dials. Carston, standing beside her, was white-faced and tense.

Slowly a shifting blur materialized on the huge televisive of the ethero-magnum. It focused, and the thin-lipped, ascetic features of the Earth Coordinator materialized in the immense Council room of Earth. The Council in full session surrounded him. All were intent on their receiving screens, on which Carston and Cynthia were reflected.

Cynthia stepped nervously aside, and Carston came forward. He bowed low. Then his voice, hoarse with uncontrollable elation, rose in greeting.

"Your Beneficence, and Elders of the Council! I am speaking from *Vulcan*, the long-sought base of Captain George Marnik, where I have been a prisoner for many months! But no longer. This," he gestured hesitantly, "is Cynthia, George Marnik's daughter, for whom I beseech the Coordinator's and the Council's clemency for the service she is about to do."

Then in slow and measured words Carston told in detail all that had happened, beginning with his own release from the Swamp by Cynthia, relating Luhor's murder of Marnik, and finally telling of the asteroid where Luhor's space cruisers were being assembled, and of the new allotropic metal being mined on *Vulcan*. Then he motioned for Cynthia to come forward.

The Coordinator had listened in silence, his grim face impassive. Every eye in the Council room was unwaveringly on the screen, and the silence lay heavy between two distant worlds. Slowly, Cynthia walked toward the ethero-magnum sender, a sheaf of note paper in her hand. She smiled wanly, but confidently at Carston. Then in a colorless voice she read her mathematical figures giving the position of the asteroid in space, and the formula for the shortest approach from *Vulcan*, as the key for computation of the trajectory from Earth. Without animation, she gave the formula for the allotropic metal process, and the secret of the entrance to *Vulcan*.

Then she fell silent. As if she didn't know what to do, she turned to Carston and caught for a fleeting instant the smug smile of triumph on his lips; but before she could comprehend its meaning, it was gone.

"Will . . . will I be pardoned?" Cynthia

questioned aloud, more to Carston than to the Coordinator on the screen.

But the silence in the Council room of Earth persisted, as busy mathematicians already were furiously computing the mathematical formulae. A thin, contemptuous smile had parted the Coordinator's lips. It was the first time Carston had ever seen him smile, and the room where he and Cynthia stood, although millions of miles distant, seemed colder suddenly as that glacial glimmer came through the screen.

Carston opened his lips to speak. "Your Beneficence," he began—

BUT suddenly, catapulted from the deepening darkness of the corridors, an azure-winged figure with curved hands outstretched fell like an avenging fury upon Carston's back! Dainty hands, suddenly transformed into claws, dug like spikes of steel; a supple body too ethereal for strength, now seemed made of metal as the Venusian girl attacked him with a savagery that brought every man of Earth's distant Council room to his feet!

Close on her heels Mark Denning had barely time to separate the tangled figures. Carston's face dripped blood where Aladdian's fingernails had furrowed deep. Cynthia seemed rooted to the spot. So incredibly swift had it been, that the battle was over in seconds. Aladdian's eyes were pools of fire as she faced the Council. Her streaming hair seemed to shimmer as she spat her venom into the screen.

"Very well, send your space fleet, you clumsy fools! Let your madness condemn the planets to a bath of blood! Yes, you have the formula for the allotropic metal—but what good is it to you without a source of supply? You have the location of the asteroid—but do you suppose your fleet can stand against such a mobile fortress as Luhor will make it? But it's a waste of words, I know I can never convince you. Only death and destruction can. But this I do tell you! Never, *never again* will you enslave Venus! Never again will you imprison me in that inhuman Swamp, and never will you land on *Vulcan*! For I have one weapon left, one which only we of Venus possess. We have used it once on Mars, once in

our history only, for we are not warlike. But before Luhor and thee Martian hordes overrun my planet and *yours* as he certainly can, I will use this weapon, Earth-ian!"

On the screen, the Coordinator's face was livid. "Arrest her," he said across the immense distance to Carston. "In the name of the Supreme Council of the Tri-Planetary Federation, arrest her! Her life's forfeit!"

But Carston stood motionless, pale as death, suddenly confronted by the grim figure of Mark who gripped an electro-pistol in his hand.

At this veritable moment, out of the void, cutting in on the beam like the disembodied cackination of some strange creature, wave upon wave of gigantic mirth poured on two worlds! And as every participant of this drama stood tense, watching their screens, there slowly emerged the half-breed figure of Luhor, his gargantuan laughter still roaring in uncontrollable paroxysms.

"So that's it!" Luhor managed to choke between spasms. "What entertainment you have provided me with—and what information! And to think, Aladdian, that I'd planned to make you my empress. Why, my little dove has claws!" he exclaimed admiringly. His immense, ugly bulk dominated the entire screen, as his bellowing laughter began again.

The Earth Coordinator, almost beside himself, threw a master switch; the televise screens of two worlds flickered and went blank, the pulsing whine of the atomo-motors was like a dirge.

Cynthia passed a trembling hand across her eyes, and her gaze wavered before Aladdian's accusing stare. She glanced briefly at Carston with a slowly dawning wonderment, as if an awareness of his aims had begun to awaken within her.

"I—I'm afraid I've made a mess of things," she said in a slow, deep voice. "Ever since father's death, I seem to have lost my grip. I'm so sorry, Aladdian, I thought it was for the best; Carston assured me we'd be pardoned. . . ." Her voice trailed off as she turned her face away from them all.

"I should burn you!" Mark Denning said to Carston in a cold, tight voice, and Carston went white. "You've man-

aged to wreck our plans about as completely as possible. If the Earth blasts Luhor out of space, we face surrender or slow starvation. If Luhor wins, he can starve us out or blast his way in here with his allotropic cruisers, now that he's forewarned by you. Either way we lose—but I guarantee you, Carston, *you* won't come out of this easily!" Each word was like ice, and Aladdian nodded slowly at Mark's words, a strange light in her brilliant eyes.

"WE haven't lost yet, Mark." With a swift motion she crossed to the ethero-magnum again, and turned it on. "Remember, I have still a weapon. My people are behind me."

"But Venus doesn't have a fleet! Earth has seen to that."

"Wait." Her unerring precision brought the screen to life in a burst of light. A scene took place, alien, exotic—the imperial palace on Venus. A great crowd stood before it in silence, extending into the distance, as if the park-like expanse had become a place of pilgrimage. In eternal vigil all faced the televise screen that rose from the floor level to the top of the palace. Fantastic blue-green mountains filled the background, dwarfing the small fragile figure that materialized on the receiving screen.

"My people, I speak to you for the third, perhaps for the last time—" There was a world of yearning in the cello-like voice as Aladdian opened her arms toward them. A cyclonic roar burst forth in tribute and greeting, but quickly died down as they awaited her message.

"When I last spoke, I told you not to act without word from me. I hoped I would never have to give that word, but now I fear I must. The hour is almost here. What I will ask of you, is the supreme sacrifice. You know what that means. I, too, am prepared to make it. There is no other way. Many will die, but only that the others may avoid an even worse slavery than they now endure, and that we may attain our rightful inheritance, an equal place in the Planetary Federation." The voice rose like a stream of music, and tears were in Aladdian's eyes. "The choice is yours, my people!"

When the thunderous response had died

down in waves of overpowering sound, Aladdian stood in silence for several moments; in silence, too, the Venusian multitude remained with upturned faces. Mark had an eerie feeling that a *Planet* was in tune with the fragile, winged figure.

When the connection had been broken, and once more the laboratory had reverted to semi-gloom, Mark turned to Carston and removed his weapons from him. "I can't take any chances with you now," he said coldly, "after what you've done. You wanted to become a hero in the eyes of the Earth Council. Well, from now on you'll dance to my tune."

"But not for long!" Carston sneered openly, recovering his poise and confidence. "The game's up, Denning; you're a renegade to Earth and should be treated as such. It'll be child's play for Earth's fleet to burn Luhor and his asteroid to a crisp. After that—" He stopped and grinned contemptuously.

"After that, we'll be taken care of?" It was Aladdian who spoke, and her voice was soft like dark molten gold. "Careful, Mark," she interposed quickly, placing her hand on Mark's arm as his grip tightened on the electro.

"I don't deserve any lenience," Cynthia said dully. "I've been a fool."

Aladdian gazed at the Earth-girl with a universe of pity in her eyes, and a great understanding. "No, my dear," she said softly, "not a fool. Only a girl in love."

"But you!" she lashed at Carston. "You shall reap the whirlwind; and I assure you, a Venusian whirlwind is beyond your ken!"

XI

"NO sign of the asteroid!" Mark Denning's voice was harsh as he addressed the restless group of men milling in front of the laboratory. "We've picked up Earth's fleet, that is all; it's now proceeding beyond the orbit of Mars. Come in and watch if you wish, but it may be hours yet."

The clang and clamor of the furnaces had long ago ceased, as Vulcan awaited the outcome of the space struggle that would mean so much to them all. Since Carston's betrayal had become known, the

men had discussed the situation from every angle. Paradoxically they hoped for Luhor's victory, so that *they* could deal with the Martian half-breed. At the very worst, death was better than Paradim, which surely awaited them again if Earth won in this crisis.

As Earth's fleet in awesome array, advanced toward the asteroid's position which Cynthia had given, Aladdian kept a ceaseless vigil at the televisé. In far off N'Vaarl, the palace grounds were a sea of upturned Venusian faces intent upon their screen. Dar Vaajo sat brooding on his barbaric throne on Mars, his craggy face dark with passion, thinking of the upstart Luhor who had wrecked his plans. Within the austere Council chamber of Earth, the Coordinator paced to and fro before the screen, while the awed Council didn't dare to stir. It hadn't been hard for the ethero-screens of each world to pick out the flaming majesty of Earth's fleet, and they had followed its progress for hours. The meteoric speed seemed a snail's pace, across the respective televisé panels.

"Look!" Aladdian cried, spilling the cup of hot concentrate Cynthia had brought to her.

With electrifying suddenness, the scene in the panel had leaped to vivid life. Concentric whorls of green, disintegrating light flashed from all units of Earth's fleet simultaneously, merging into a single appalling cloud that preceded the fleet itself. To the watchers, the spread of the light seemed slow, but it must have encompassed thousands of miles.

"But why?" Aladdian breathed, even as she twisted the dials trying to center the scene more perfectly. "They're not within hours of the asteroid belt, and they will only give their position away to Luhor!"

Carston, Mark and the others had come crowding into the room to watch the scene. Carston whispered, exultantly, "That green light is radio-active disintegrating energy! It merges with whatever it touches, unbalancing the atomic structure of metal. Wait'll they envelop Luhor's asteroid in that!"

"Yes, I know it well," Aladdian murmured. "They used it in the long war against Venus. But there is a neutralizing force now, which even Earth does not

know. George Marnik developed it, right here on Vulcan Base."

Carston's lips curled, but he said nothing. The sight of Earth's mighty armada sweeping forward on its mission had instilled him with a swaggering confidence. They continued to watch the scene in silence, even as the Earth Council and the people of Venus and Dar Vaajo on Mars were watching.

Still the Fleet swept forward. Minutes passed. The greenish half-circle of light preceded it, beating back the darkness, expanding unimaginable distances as though reaching out greedy hands.

Then suddenly Aladdian's words came true.

FROM a point in space far in advance of the Fleet, a tiny white beam of light became visible. It reached out like a slashing saber, swiftly expanding and closing the gap of darkness. It came from the asteroid itself, now revealed to the watchers for the first time—merely a tiny dark mass that seemed to move forward with infinite caution against the Fleet.

"There it is!" Mark breathed. "Luhor's carried his plan through! He's made a rogue asteroid of it, moved it clear out of the belt—"

Words ceased, as they watched the preliminary maneuvers. The asteroid's slashing saber of white touched the disintegrating power of the green. But it was the green that disintegrated! Slowly, almost carressingly, the pale beam moved across the advancing blanket of light. Where it touched, the green dissolved magically as though it had never been.

"That's what I meant. The etheric inertia ray!" Aladdian's murmur was tinged with exultation, as she sensed Carston standing beside her taut with surprise.

Still the Earth Fleet moved forward in battle formation, in staggered horizontal tiers. Impelled by the terrific momentum, it depended upon maneuverability to escape the impending danger. But, inexorably, the asteroid moved forward also, as if hungry to meet its enemy. Limned behind its own ghastly light, it was revealed as a leisurely rotating mass of rock and mineral, with jagged pinnacles

reaching out and deep black gullies agape.

A blinding lance of electric blue lashed from Earth's Flagship, like a probing finger searching for a weak point. It stabbed Luhor's white ray and ended in a corruscating upheaval of incandescent light. The asteroid was very close now; it seemed as if nothing could prevent that sidereal mass, some ten miles in diameter, from plowing through the tiers of Earth Spacers.

But in that veritable moment when disaster seemed certain, Earth's massed fleet executed one of the most spectacular feats of navigation the Universe had ever witnessed. The units literally *broke apart* and moved outward into a perfect cone-like formation, with the base, or open end, toward the asteroid. Again the green radiance, from all sides now, went out to envelop the asteroid in a glaucous sheath, as the dark mass drifted into the trap.

"This is it!" Carston gloated hoarsely. "Now watch your asteroid crumble!" The others said nothing. All were tense, as the tiny ten-mile world entered the open end of the cone to what seemed certain destruction. Now the white etheric inertia ray lashed out savagely again, sweeping in swift arcs, but failed to dispel the concentrated waves of green fire.

Then from the surface of the dark world, Luhor's own space fleet arose—six cruisers only, dwarfed in size by some of Earth's larger ships. With blinding speed, the six allotropic cruisers headed for the closing jaws of the trap.

THE Earth Commander was not prepared for such acceleration. It was unbelievable. He had little time to think, as Luhor's cruisers blasted with the raking fire of electro-cannon at close range. Three Earth ships went hurtling end over end through the void, ripped from stern to bow. Impervious to the wild fire of Earth's Fleet, the allotropic cruisers plowed on. Two Earth cruisers at the jaws of the trap were unable to maneuver in time. Luhor's ships in a straight line hit them head-on, plowed through them and out again, leaving behind a tangled wreck of twisted girders and scattered debris.

Luhor's six ships were out of the trap now, and they wheeled in a mighty arc.

hung chain-poised as though to watch.

Behind, the now glowing asteroid erupted the real destruction. This had been Luhor's plan from the first. The balance of men taken from Paradim Swamp, left on the bleak little world to fight for their lives, now released hidden rocket tubes that blasted in perfectly spaced rotation. The rocky world began to spin, as it plunged ponderously forward. Bank upon bank of electro-cannon lashed out like uncurled blue lightning. Atomite bombs burst among Earth's fleet which surrounded this deadly pinwheel. In less than a minute Earth's vast armada was completely disorganized, space became a shambles of ripped metal plates, twisted rocket tubes and blasted hulls.

Like a livid, craggy corner of hell running rampant, the rogue asteroid spun faster and faster, spewing annihilation. But this was its death throes. The concentrated disintegrating glow had taken effect, and could not now be stopped. The craggy world began to crumble in great masses of rock and metal like a leprous organism. The few remaining units of the Earthian fleet tried desperately to escape the disintegrating lethal mass—but behind them now, at a safe distance from it all, Luhor's ships barred the way. Pitilessly his electro-cannon raked them, impervious to their erratic salvos. His Flagship with its impossible speed darted among them like a cosmic scimitar, until barely half a dozen of Earth's former armada were able to flee in scattered disarray.

Half a dozen, out of more than a hundred. Contemptuously, Luhor did not even deign to pursue.

Where an immense battle fleet and a dwarf world had battled for supremacy in space, now only shattered metal fragments and a disintegrated rain of mineral and rock remained veiled by cosmic darkness.

XII

IT had been too much and too sudden for speech. Aladdian was on her feet now, even she was still gripped by the awe of the vast debacle. Mark watched Ernest Carston stumble dazedly from the Laboratory room, the appalling horror in his eyes betraying how intimately Earth's

tragedy was his. He'd sent them out there to conquer, and they had remained to die. No one spoke. The crowding men who'd hoped for a victory by Luhor, even turned away before the magnitude of his power.

The laboratory on Vulcan reflected in miniature the shocked silence of four worlds. They'd seen the mightiest armada of all time reduced to nothing in a space of minutes.

Aladdian was the first to act. With the same beam, through which they'd watched the holocaust, she contacted Earth. She tuned the Council chamber where gray faces looked to the Coordinator in bewilderment and fear. But the Coordinator, stricken to the depths of his narrow soul, was incapable of speech. In the oppressive silence Aladdian's winged figure materialized on the screen.

"I greet you, Earthians, for the last time." Her molten voice had overtones of sadness. "You have seen your mighty fleet destroyed. Earth is defenseless. Luhor is on his way to Earth."

"How—how do you know?" The Coordinator was moved to speech now, galvanized into life by a more immediate fear!

"How? Because I am right now in telepathic contact with Luhor's mind."

"We shall fight to the end!"

"Yes, I expected that of you. You would condemn Earth to the same fate as your Fleet. Awaken, Earthmen! No weapon that you have can destroy allotropic metal. You have seen Luhor's ships slice through your vessels as if they were paper. You're at his mercy now."

Aladdian allowed her words to sink while she widened the beam to include Mars and Venus as well as Earth, that her voice might carry to the entire Federation.

"I am not speaking to you only, now, but to three worlds whose fate depends on your decision. Agree to what I ask, and the danger from Luhor will be eliminated."

"What do you ask?" The Coordinator's voice came through as a mere whisper.

"Three things only. Absolute liberation of Venus and Mars, which means equal representation at the Tri-Planetary Federation Council. Complete abolishment of the inhuman Swamp of Paradim.

And Venus to retain Vulcan with its allotropic metal as a measure of final safety. Agree to these points before the assembled peoples of the inhabited planets who are listening now, and Luhor shall never reach Earth."

On Mars and Earth and Venus her winged figures were reflected, while her voice cadenced in the ears of untold millions.

"First," came the Coordinator's voice, "how are you to prevent that fiend Luhor from pursuing his course? And second, what guarantees will we have that Venus will not build more of the allotropic cruisers to attack?" Although white and shaken, the Coordinator could still snarl.

"I will answer your second question first. As you well know, Venus has never in all her history resorted to war. Rather than kill," her voice became bitter, "we submitted to Earth's cruel domination. We saw the inhuman Prison Swamp spring into being, for greed of the Josphian pearls; death and persecution for the sake of power. I even personally suffered this!" She held up her wings whose tendons had been cut. "Yet despite it all, history does not record murder by Venusians. That, Earthian, is your guarantee that we shall keep the peace. As to Luhor, I and I alone can stop him now. This is an offered chance you may take or leave. Remember, Luhor's fleet has ten times the speed of Earth's fastest vessel, and will be there sooner than you suppose. Think fast, Earthian!"

"Think also," Mark interposed in a voice of steel, "that here on Vulcan we have the allotropic metal, the means to work it, and the men to build our own cruisers if we so desire!"

"I accept," the Coordinator said sullenly. Despite his fear and helpless rage, he could only envisage defeat and destruction should Luhor arrive at Earth. As for Aladdian on Vulcan stopping the mad half-breed, he did not see how it was possible; but he had nothing further to lose by agreeing. With a gesture, he ordered the Council to draw up a pact.

Four worlds watched the signatures grow one by one. Then, and not until then, did Aladdian play her last card as she brought Venus into focus.

"NOW!"

THE single word was the last she uttered as she opened her arms. Her people were ready. They knew the sacrifice.

Millions of miles away an entire *Planet*, as if it had been a single cosmic mind, concentrated on Luhor's fleet. A mighty stream of thought flowed out, vast but intangible. Wave upon wave, directed by Aladdian, the accumulated thought-vibrations beat ceaselessly upon the minds of Luhor and his men. And on Venus, slowly, here and there a winged figure fell and lay still, its mind sapped by the prodigious effort that knew no bounds. But the knowledge that Aladdian, their Princess, who directed the combined flow, was under an infinitely greater mental strain than any of them individually, gave them added inspiration.

Aladdian had long since made all the others, even Mark, leave the Laboratory. She maintained her vigil and efforts alone. On her magnum screen, which had shifted to cosmic space, the six invulnerable vessels continued their purposeful route toward Earth. Serenely they sped.

But suddenly, with an odd twist, one of the Spacers plunged headlong without warning into a sister ship. Both exploded into a cataract of flame. Another wavered, wheeled, then plunged toward outer space at vertiginous speed, to disappear in a dwindling dot of silver. Of the remaining three, one began to fire broadsides against the others, then rotated over and over out of control, while airlocks opened and figures leaped out to instantaneous death in the fridity of space. It was a scene of silent horror.

But while scores died in space, hundreds died on Venus at the magnitude of the effort. Still the Venusian populace of millions concentrated in purposeful silence.

A sense of madness unleashed stole into the laboratory room where Aladdian stood alone, motionless and white-faced. She scarcely breathed. Her blue eyes were dilated. On the screen now only one cruiser remained. Not until then did Aladdian move, her hand reaching out automatically to the dials. A second later the interior of Luhor's cruiser lay revealed.

The huge half-breed had held out to

the last. He'd realized what was happening, knew that the thought-power of an entire telepathic nation was reaching out across vast distances of space, the ghastly vibration of madness battering against the brains of his men. Now even Luhor began to succumb, his brutal face contorted by spasms of demoniac evil. His crew of men around him were already insane. A few sobbed monotonously on their knees, rocking from side to side. Others were already dead. One crewman was absorbed in daintily flaying another with a bright, keen penknife, while the rest were systematically destroying the ship and each other.

In the midst of the scene, Luhor's face went suddenly grey and blank. He drew his electro-pistol and like a man possessed, used it methodically about him until only he remained alive. It was then that Aladdian used her last remaining strength, directing Luhor like an automaton to the controls, where he remained frozen. The vessel heeled in space and changed course, heading away from Earth now, speeding directly sunward toward Vulcan Base.

Within the laboratory room, Aladdian swayed, her face whiter than death; she grasped at the instrument panel for support, but her fingers closed on air, as she crumpled to the floor.

XIII

SHE was barely conscious of Mark and Cynthia and Carston seconds later, bursting into the room. And of Mark's face mirroring his anxiety as he hurried to her.

In the same instant she knew that her people's accumulative vibration had reached an apex of power, and like an avenging fury was turning *their way—centering on one person in that laboratory room!* Desperately Aladdian tried to stop it, but she was too near exhaustion and too late.

Like a concentrated, cosmic javelin of death, that stream of madness reached

Carston alone. He shrieked but once, and leaped wildly, hands clutching at his temples; then he crumpled to the floor. He had been blasted to death as suddenly as if a gigantic atom-blast had drilled him between the eyes.

Not until then, could Aladdian rise wearily to her feet, assisted by Mark. Sorrowfully she looked at the figure of Carston. Already on Venus, she knew, thousands lay dead, and perhaps hundreds more had died in this final vengeful effort.

"They could not forget," she said sadly, "that it was Carston who hounded me throughout the System to result in my imprisonment at Paradim; and that it was he who cut the tendons of my wings."

She still clung to Mark's arm, half-supported by him. But despite her utter weariness and all she had gone through, Aladdian still had eyes for Cynthia, who stood there, a forlorn, shattered figure, staring down at the body of Carston.

"Do not mind too much, my dear." Aladdian's voice and heart went out in pity to the Earth girl. "In a short time you will forget all that has happened here. Come with us to Venus, I know you will find happiness there."

"With us?" It was Mark who spoke, his voice a bare whisper of hope.

"Yes, Mark." Aladdian smiled at him, the impish smile he had known in Paradim. Then from the recesses of her tunic she drew forth a gleaming, iridescent pearl.

"The purple Josmian!" Mark gasped. "The one I found in the Swamp. I'd forgotten about it!"

"I kept it for you, Mark, knowing I would need it for this moment. From lower species to middle order," her smile was impish again, "is not bad for an Earthman. Take the Josmian now, it's yours; with it I elevate you to the highest order and—"

But she said no more, for within Mark's arms she was deciding he wasn't much taller than the average Venusian; no, not a great deal taller, at all.

THE SANDHOUND

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

The key to a world-empire lay in a tiny vial of glittering sand. Death waited in dark shadows to wrest the key from a slender girl. And in other shadows stood a rakish freebooter, the Sandhound—ready to exterminate the human rats that infested Mars' rusty sands.

Illustration by Harry Leydenfrost

TWO MEN walked along under the western end of the vast, domed city of Marsport with the effortless ease of desert animals. This was the slum district, where the dome arched downward to bury itself deep in the sands. There was but the breath of a breeze, for the huge fans beneath the city imparted little air circulation here along the Curve. No one cared. The poor were used to bad air and worse living conditions; and the rich slept in their homes in the center of the glass-manufacturing city where the artificial breezes blew regularly and efficiently.

These two who moved through the shadows of a noisome alley certainly did not indicate by their manner of dress that they were in any way accustomed to the poverty evidenced by the rows of ramshackle houses, the secretively boarded up rear doors, the general air of negligence and filth. Both had but recently quitted a late stage show at the Martian Royal Playhouse which depicted life from a certain unrecognizable and distorted viewpoint. Yet, they had had a purpose in going to the playhouse. Both had that curiosity concerning the rich which comes not from a desire to emulate, but from a desire to observe and learn. Perhaps one could find in their evening's occupation a parallel in the activities of the sandhound, that animal peculiar to the deserts of Mars which travels at enormous speed and for enormous distances, hunting down the poisonous rats which are its chief source of food.

The taller of the two faultlessly-attired men was known, in fact, by that name—the Sandhound. His victims were the poisonous rats who prey on the helpless. At the play he had seen and recognized many notables, among them Dorian Mocker, the silver-haired, thin-lipped glass-manufacturer who, through his own-

ership of Martian Glassware, Inc., held Marsport in an iron grip.

The Sandhound knew much about Mocker that the man himself would have sworn was a secret. The Sandhound, however, a strange figure who knew Mars as few have ever been permitted to know it, had certain connections which kept him supplied with the choicest bits of information. He knew, for instance, that Mocker held only forty-nine shares of stock in Martian Glassware, Inc. He knew that, in spite of this, Mocker controlled the votes in the corporation, dictated its policy, and therefore virtually controlled the lives of the glass-workers and their families who had become his slaves.

Some day, the Sandhound knew, his knowledge of Mocker's infamous activities would cause that great man to tumble from his high place; it was a day that the Sandhound looked forward to with a quiet certainty, for it was such men as Mocker that the Sandhound, in his secret and lawless campaign against the oppressors of Mars, was determined to wipe out.

As the Sandhound strode along, effortlessly swinging his bronze-red para-wood cane, his feet made no sound, even on the cobblestones of the street. His face, burned by a hot Sun to the bronze-red of the ferrous-oxide deserts themselves, seemed relaxed, uncaring. In reality, his every sense was alert—his eyes, grey, surrounded by little wrinkles which come from the enjoyment of life alone, missed no shadow, no niche in the wall; his ears catalogued every sound; and every stray odor, of which there were many, was dissected, its cause analyzed, its source noted. Experience had long since taught him that danger and sudden death were the lot of him who neglected any slightest detail of environment—particularly of him who trod so close to that boundary which separates law and lawlessness.



Sand rose in billowing clouds from the Sandhound's ruptured space-suit—and Mocker came hurtling forward, his face snarling in triumph.

The other man was shorter and abnormally broad of shoulder. He moved with the same easy stealthiness as the Sandhound whose satellite he was. Halfway down his nose, the bone bent sideways, silent narrator of a long-gone barroom battle. A half dozen scars on the angular, uneven face grimly hinted of fights to the death. Yet, one would not have guessed from the sullen dissatisfaction of his lips, the lidded, sleepy eyes, that he was capable of defending himself against the onslaught of even a mediocre opponent.

The two men walked slowly, with no other purpose than to wait—to wait for something to happen.

THE shorter of the men, who had long ago taken the name of Bozo Dullard, finally spoke, his voice carrying no farther than was necessary to reach the Sandhound's ears: "I'll give every eagle I own for a bed. I'll throw in our space-ship. Then I'll sign away my life, for two uninterrupted weeks alone. I want to sleep. I'm dead for sleep. If I don't get some sleep, I'll die."

The Sandhound was used to this. "You slept yesterday," he reminded him.

"I want some real sleep. I want a week," said Bozo Dullard, his eyes swimming with the ecstasy of his desire. "I want to drop off, dead to the world, and I don't want to wake up until there's some excitement in the air. You don't understand about sleep. It isn't a waste of time. It's a guard against monotony. I'll sleep when there isn't anything doing. I'll wake up when there is. That's the way I am."

"That time on Pluto, when I lost track of you—I slept—I slept for a week. Then I got up and ate some breakfast and I slept for another week. I awoke and at a good lunch and back I went—"

The Sandhound was used to all of this. "But you didn't sleep for another week," he smiled faintly.

Bozo's eyes flashed. "That's right." His cupped hand swept past his broken nose and captured and crushed an annoying flying bug. "Right. I woke up, because I knew you were having a hell of a time, back on Earth, and I knew I had to get there pronto."

"You received my telepathic message."

Bozo's ruined face showed swift scorn. "Hah! Telepathy! That's the bunk. An old wife's tale. A superstition. You expect me to believe in telepathy, chief? That was just a hunch—why, I just *knew* you were in trouble—and don't try to talk about telepathy to me!

"Why, that night the drug-syndicate boys were thinking of throwing you off in the Jovian fog-bank—was that hunch or wasn't it? Telepathy, me eye. Me, I don't believe in such mumbo-jumbo."

"Quiet," admonished the Sandhound, "We're in a city run by a gang of big-league crooks. The rich throttle the poor and the helpless. In other words, this is excellent territory for a bit of night-prowling. What do you hear?"

"Nothing," growled Bozo, still sullen.

As they walked along, the Sandhound devoted himself entirely to a study of Bozo's scarred, sullen face. He was used to Bozo, a skeptic of the first order who could have seen all the dead prophets climbing down Jacob's ladder and still be from Missouri. But the Sandhound was aware of Bozo's peculiar abilities even if Bozo himself was not. And so he watched Bozo's face.

Bozo's eyes were still sleepy. He was throttling a yawn, fighting it back. He was almost asleep on his feet—and then that changed. Bozo's eyes opened wide. His lips clamped shut. His face turned hard and rocky.

He stopped in mid-step. "Oh oh," he said.

The Sandhound grabbed him, whirled him back into the shadows, purely from a sense of caution.

Sounding eerily through the dark, deserted alley came the muffled snap of a V-ray gun. And, almost as briefly, a tiny, piercing feminine scream. Silence closed down again.

Bozo took time out only to show his fighting smile. "Me, I'm awake," he stated.

The Sandhound moved fast, ran silently down the alley, his uncanny sense of hearing guiding him toward a ramshackle little shack as surely as a beacon. In the darkness, then, a palling darkness which scarcely allowed one to see a half dozen feet ahead, a figure hurled against the Sandhound. It was only his natural agility which enabled him to retain his balance.

He spun sidewise, against the shack, his assailant, if assailant he was, gone. The Sandhound heard diminishing footsteps, and briefly saw the figure of a man before it disappeared into the labyrinth of alleys. But the Sandhound was frowning, his mind following a lightning trail of logic as he turned to the scaling door of the shack.

HE turned the knob; felt an opposing pressure on the other side of the door. The Sandhound swung the door open, and stood facing the girl, who stood facing him, both manicured hands clasped to the breast of her stylishly cut, white-silk blouse; her mouth open in an elongated circle of agitated bewilderment. In one hand, plainly visible to the all-perceiving eye of the Sandhound, she held a tiny, transparent vial of almost milk-white sand; in the other, the shining tube of a V-ray gun.

Emblazoned minutely on the medallion of her gold necklace were the initials V.C.A.

The Sandhound was too late to keep her hand from streaking to the light-switch. The light went out, and the girl twisted away with a throttled cry.

"Stay where you are," she whispered through the shadows, and the Sandhound shifted to the left—just in time to escape the livid streak of flame that leaped across the room. The Sandhound kicked the door shut, and, save for a narrow rectangle of ghost-pale light coming from an unshaded window, the room was completely shut off from light. But he heard the vainly withheld breath of the girl,—and the padding, almost soundless footsteps of Bozo Dullard.

"Put that toy away," said the Sandhound.

"After I burn you," she whispered hysterically. "You're another one, sent by him. But I don't trust any of you, and I'll give myself up to Mo—"

Her voice ceased. There was a sound of struggle. The Sandhound carelessly guided himself to the light switch.

"Got her," Bozo grinned at him as the light flooded the dingy room.

"Good job," the Sandhound conceded. He crossed to the girl, took the vial of white sand from her fingers. She struggled anew in Bozo Dullard's grip, her eyes

growing big with rage as she tried to scream through Bozo Dullard's throttling hand. His attention seemed to be rooted entirely on the vial of sand which the Sandhound was turning over in his fingers.

"Crystal sand," the Sandhound muttered abstractedly. "Virgin."

"Ahh!" Bozo made a sneering sound. "There isn't any virgin white sand on Mars, and you know it."

Watching the girl, the Sandhound saw the look of momentary startlement sweep across her almost classically-even features. Then she was struggling again. The Sandhound thoughtfully balanced the vial in his hand and made a motion to Bozo Dullard. Bozo released the girl.

She came at the Sandhound like a tornado. She clawed at the vial, while little whimpering sounds came from her lips. The Sandhound evaded her, and the next time she came at him, extended the vial toward her. She swiped at it—and stopped, dumbly looking at the vial, as if she couldn't believe it were in her possession again. Then she gave a little cry, grabbed up her white glass-fur coat in one hand, and flew toward the door.

Bozo Dullard was somehow ahead of her, smiling gently, persuasively. She stopped, trembling, her fists clenching and unclenching.

The Sandhound paid no more attention to her. He made a swift survey of the room. A tottering chair, a scarred table, a couch—and a closet door. He crossed the room, and with his hand on the knob turned to find the girl struggling in Bozo's arms again. She was facing the Sandhound.

"Get away from there," she panted. "Don't you dare touch that door—get away, do you hear?" Horror and desperation mingled in her deep hazel eyes—singularly attractive eyes, the Sandhound thought.

"I am acting on the assumption," he told her, smiling quizzically, "that true beauty has no beastly qualities."

Her eyes blazed. "And that pure evil has no virtues—that's my assumption." Her full lips quivered, and though she did not drop her eyes, a hot tear ran down her cheek.

The Sandhound bowed. "Perhaps you have us mixed with someone else." Without further preliminary, he opened the door.

THE dead man was lying grotesquely doubled up. A tiny, scorched hole in his forehead attested to the manner of his sudden death. The Sandhound dropped to one knee, running a hand thoughtfully over his clean-shaven chin. At the Martian Royal Playhouse that same evening, this man had been alive and healthy. In the box behind the great Dorian Mocker he had sat, and his mind did not seem to be on the play. When the play reached its height and the attention of most persons would be directed on the action, he had disappeared. Five minutes later, Mocker also had left.

With the voiceless understanding that flows between some men, Bozo Dullard, looking at the dead face from the other side of the room, said happily, "Say, it's the same guy! Fancy little rat, isn't he, dressed up in those duds?"

The girl suddenly broke into a torrent of sobs, broke away from Bozo and seated herself on the chair, hiding her face in her hands.

Bozo was uncomfortable, shaking his head back and forth. "That was a good shot," he said admiringly. "What're you bawling about?" He balanced the little V-ray gun in his hand, looking imploringly at the Sandhound.

The Sandhound repressed a smile at Bozo's uneasiness in the presence of weeping womanhood. He sat down on the edge of the table and waited until the girl's sobs subsided. He then spoke gently, swinging his cane in slow, easy arcs; meanwhile, the dead man, Larens Spevans, Dorian Mocker's right-hand man, lying half in, half out of the closet door, his eyes staring sightlessly at the cobwebbed ceiling.

"We're not Mocker's men, if that's what's troubling you," the Sandhound said gravely, his grey eyes exerting the candid appeal which had made him numberless friends throughout the system. "Suppose you tell us what it's about."

She looked up. Her face, full-lipped, round, young, healthy with that healthfulness which goes beyond mere beauty, was exhausted. But it was evident that she believed the Sandhound.

"I can't tell you," she said limply. "It's hopeless. I've been hiding out ever since I came in on the Earth-Mars ship, but somehow they found me. They've got

Tommy, and if they don't get it from me, they'll get it from him." Tears began to run down from her eyes, slow, quiet tears which she made no effort to withhold. "I can't tell you," she choked, "because nobody can help."

"Then," said the Sandhound, "if you won't tell *me*, I'll tell *you*. The Tommy you refer to is Tommy Duane. Tommy Duane is a sandie—been around Mars for a long time, hunting for the lost crystal-sand valley, which the first explorers of Mars claimed to have seen as they flashed over the planet for the first landing in history. Tommy has found the valley. Mocker found out about it. He promptly tried to get control. Tommy wouldn't sell. So now Mocker has him somewhere, and you think they're going to torture him for the location of the valley. Where've they got Tommy?"

Her breast rose and fell. She stared at him with wide eyes. "How did you know all that?"

The Sandhound shrugged.

She said, fighting to control herself, "I don't know where they've got him."

"D'you know the location of the valley?"

Her fingers closed around the vial of white sand with a barely perceptible motion. She said, "No."

"I see." The Sandhound gestured at Larens Spevans' body. "Mocker sent him to force the location from you. You shot him in self-defense."

She nodded jerkily. "It's the first time I ever handled a gun—any kind of gun. I didn't really mean to kill him. But when I saw that I had killed him, I dragged him into the closet, and then I was going to—" She bit her lip and stopped.

The Sandhound rose and walked around the room, with a singular, quiet grace, as if searching for something. To the left of the door jamb, he found the triangular-shaped hole in the wall which resulted when the girl fired at him and missed. To the right of the door-jamb, he found a similar mark. He nodded in satisfaction.

The girl was sitting in exhausted limpness, now, totally overcome by a strain which had culminated in this moment.

The Sandhound smiled at her reassuringly. "That won't do. You can't give up now, my dear. There's work to do.

I don't want you to stay here. When Mocker finds his henchman hasn't come back, he'll send the police. That you shot Spevans in self-defense won't bear a particle of weight with the jury he'll rig up. They'll track you down. What's your name?"

She hesitated. "Ann," she said wearily. "Ann Carruthers."

"They'll track you down," said the Sandhound, "if you stick to an alias. Go to the Ares Hotel and register under the name of Victoria Catharine Adams."

She jumped up. "That's my real name," she gasped, her full lips parted in amazement. "Who are you?"

The Sandhound, never immune to a woman's beauty, found himself envying Tommy Duane. He said, "Never mind who I am. Anybody can read the newspapers, my dear—and a missing heiress is front-page news. Your identity is evident enough from the initials on your medallion."

She made a convulsive motion to hide the medallion. Then she wilted.

"I'll do as you say," she said humbly. "And you'll take care of—of the body?"

Bozo Dullard grinned a broad grin that revealed his broken teeth. "Don't worry," he promised airily. "When we start out to do something, we do it, see?"

He held the door open, invitingly. The girl frowned for a second of hesitation, and then moved swiftly about the room, gathering up her few personal effects. Then she paused in the doorway, bent a puzzled, doubtful stare on the Sandhound, and swept out into the noisome night.

II

BOZO DULLARD closed the door quickly. "Now what, boss?" He was suddenly tense. "We got to work quick. We can't trust the Adams dame."

The Sandhound knelt and once more examined the round, burned hole in the dead man's forehead. His face was thoughtful. The Sandhound knew little enough about glass, but he did know that there was a compelling, romantic lure about Martian cut-glass which demanded fantastically huge sums on the other planets. There were any number of glass combines on Mars, employing Earth-

workers and sorogasters, who were the natives of Mars, and who possessed to the finest degree that instinct for glass-working which is seldom found in human beings. Martian Glassware, Inc., was perhaps the most powerful and largest of these glass-combines.

Ever since the establishment of the first Martian glass-factories on Mars, however, the ferrous-oxide in the sand had been the bane of manufacturers. Ferrous-oxide—iron—gave the limitless deserts their red color. Also, it was impossible to make salable glass which had ferrous-oxide in it. Most of it could be removed by an expensive process. That which remained sometimes acted to give glass a brownish tint such as is found in beer bottles.

A sand field free of the ubiquitous ferrous-oxide was something that the glass men had been dreaming about for years. Up until this time, it had been just that—a dream. Now the fabled, lost crystal-sand valley, free of iron, had been found. And Dorian Mocker, naturally, was trying to get control—by foul means. Moreover, the Sandhound knew as he thoughtfully regarded the thin, dead face, Mocker, with characteristic efficiency, was trying to kill two birds with one stone.

"He came energetically to his feet again, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"You know what to do with the body, Bozo," he said grimly. "Meantime, I've got other work to do. We'll meet along the line somewhere."

"Okay, boss. I gotcha." These two worked in such close harmony, a harmony all the greater because of Bozo's unrealized powers of perception, that the Sandhound knew Bozo would follow instructions to the letter. They were up to their necks in that kind of work which they understood and enjoyed best—they were working on the rim of the law, and, as such, quick thinking and foresight was a prime requisite if they hoped to get off with whole necks and accomplish their objective.

The Sandhound left the rattle-trap little shack, closed the door, and went quickly off toward the lights of a main avenue which showed some blocks away. He swung his cane jauntily and whistled at the first gyromobile that came along.

Within seconds, he had relaxed against the syntholeather of the seat, his cane between his knees, a devil-may-care glint in his eyes. The single-wheeled automobile, powered by atomic motors, twisted and dodged through the disorderly hodgepodge of pedestrians, vehicles, and occasional Martian natives of the richer castes. The roof of the dome heightened and soon lost itself to sight as the vehicle operator, reinforced by a half dozen gold eagles, broke traffic laws toward the other side of town. Soon it was in the native section, and had halted in front of an impressive, gargoyle-studded building. The Sandhound got out, motioning for the gyromobile driver to wait.

This was a funeral establishment, devoted to the business of escorting Martian natives to the Land On The Shores Of The Endless Lake—which was the Martian's idea of heaven. The Sandhound thrust open the door of the gloomy place, and found himself in an outer office, with the smell of garbage predominant. A sorogaster was sitting behind the desk. He had evidently just finished eating, for his head—or, rather, his stomach—was swelled to twice its normal size. The creature's eyes were located about halfway down his body, for that was where his brain was. These sorogasters were the original natives of Mars, ideally suited to their sandy environment. They were not animals although they moved about on legs somewhat approximating the human. In actuality, they were plants, able to root anywhere at a moment's notice and draw nourishment from the soil. To root, they simply sat down, for they trailed innumerable fine root tentacles from their posterior anatomy.

Since they did not breath oxygen, but exhaled it, breathing in carbon dioxide, their presence in Marsport was highly tolerable. They maintained that atmospheric balance which was essential to human life. The air fresheners common on space-ships were not necessary in Marsport. Too, the sorogasters, their botanical name, acted to keep the city clean. Sewage had garbage were routed to their section of town, for they found this sort of food highly nourishing. Intelligent humans and intelligent plants had formed a symbiotic society useful to both.

WHEN the sorogaster, the master of this native funeral establishment, saw the Sandhound, he rose at once, a high-pitched sound emanating from his body. This did not come from a voice-box, for he had none, but was a tropism set up at the sight of a friend—the friction of innumerable cells in his body moving across each other.

The Sandhound made a gesture which indicated that he wished to converse, and that he was in a hurry. The sorogaster, anxious to please this human being who was known far and wide as a friend of his people, hurriedly turned and from a cupboard drew a sound-board. He placed it where the Sandhound could stand on it. He did so, his slimly shod feet tapping rapidly on the board. The sorogaster picked up those vibrations in the soles of his toeless feet. To him, they were language.

He spoke back, not standing on the sound-board, for it would amplify the vibrations for the Sandhound, as it amplified the comparatively clumsy "speech" generated by the Sandhound's tapping feet.

In a thin atmosphere, evolution had put "voices" and "ears" in the sorogasters' feet. The conversation that ensued was entirely comprehensible to both. The Sandhound wanted arrangements made for a funeral—an expensive funeral.

"Plenty of stampers and a half hundred mourners," the Sandhound's feet tapped out. "Don't worry about the body—I'll arrange for that later."

He paid the sorogaster handsomely with ordinary gold eagles, then left the funeral parlor.

He got in the gyromobile and gave the driver an address.

The driver was apparently anxious to get out of this particularly odorous section of town, for he zipped away with a vim. Ten minutes later he drew up in the richer section of town, in the central part. There was an atmosphere of respectability here. The air was clean and fresh, and imported maple trees bordered broad streets, hiding from the vulgar eyes of the curious the rows of stately mansions where the elite lived. Dorian Mockler's palatial home was a mere half block up the street. Again the Sandhound in-

structed the driver to wait, and went on up the avenue.

There was a high wall bordering Mocker's home. The Sandhound went down the street branching off from the main avenue, however, looked around to see that he was not observed, and leaped to the lowest branch of the nearest maple—such a thing was in the nature of events for the Sandhound, whose more than ordinarily powerful muscles, combined with the weak Martian gravity, could easily accomplish the task.

He clambered agilely to the top of the tree, stepped over to the top of the wall, and hung by his hands. He let go, and landed up to his ankles in the soft humus of Mocker's garden.

It was dark. The Sandhound walked easily forward, hands outstretched like antennae.

A voice said, softly, "Okay, boss. What now?"

The Sandhound smiled. "How'd you know I'd be here, Bozo?"

"Just a hunch," said Bozo carelessly. "Come on, I'll show you how to get into this barn."

The Sandhound followed him along the side of the house. The only sound was their barely audible breath.

Bozo said lowly, his voice disgusted, "The girl's inside, boss. Saw her go in five minutes ago. She's going to spill the beans. We got to stop her."

The Sandhound frowned. He had suspected as much, and for that reason had hurried. It would be a serious setback if he had arrived too late.

They came to the rear of the house. The Sandhound's eyes had accustomed themselves to the dark now, and he saw the unlatched cellar window Bozo indicated. Bozo went in head first and disappeared. The Sandhound followed after, dropping lightly to the floor of the cellar.

Bozo waved off toward the depths of the cellar. "Stairs over there."

They went up a flight of stairs to the lower floor of the house, where the Sandhound found a kitchen maid gasping for air. Her hands and feet were tied.

"Tsk," the Sandhound frowned. "You've put that gag on too tight, Bozo. There you are, my good woman." He loosened the gag enough for the maid to breathe.

They went up to the second floor, the Sandhound going first now. He pushed open the door behind which he heard Victoria's voice and closed it behind him as Bozo Dullard pulled out his gun and held it on Dorian Mocker.

Mocker's protruding blue eyes, the product of a too-sumptuous living, bulged even more, and his jaw, supported by jowls, fell slack.

"What in the name of—" he began angrily.

THE Sandhound took a few steps forward, and wrested the vial of crystal sand from Mocker's hand. He stepped back and dropped it into his pocket, and smiled gallantly at Victoria.

"Never give in to a wolf, my dear girl," he reproved. "If you figured on making some sort of a deal with Mocker, I assure you it would be quite in vain. He doesn't keep his promises."

Mocker made a choking sound of rage in his corded throat. "You—you interlopers," he gasped lividly. "How did you get into my home? What do you mean by holding that gun on me? Give me back that vial!"

"Not at all," the Sandhound demurred, shaking his head, and keeping his reproving stare on Victoria. She flushed scarlet and drew a deep breath. Her lips compressed. Suddenly she was hot with anger.

"I didn't ask you two to handle my private affairs," she stormed. "I can take care of myself. I gave Mister Mocker the vial because I wanted him to have it."

She darted forward, with the intention of wresting the vial from the Sandhound by main force. The Sandhound lost his smile, and wrapped one arm around her throat. She bit his wrist and screeched. The Sandhound shoved her forcefully away and she landed in a sitting position against the wall.

"Stay there," said the Sandhound coldly, "or you'll get some more of the same. I'm not here to see you make a fool of yourself. Now you, Mocker." The Sandhound was suddenly transformed. He was all cold steel, hard and unyielding and menacing, his eyes grey pin-points. He brought his cane perpendicular to his body, pressed in a certain manner on the

hook. A tiny, blood red needle appeared at the tip of the cane. Mocker started back, going pale as death.

The Sandhound said grimly, "You may be interested to know that I'm known as the Sandhound to many people like you. I've equipped myself with the fangs of the Sandhound, too, and the poison. The poison isn't real poison—it merely paralyzes, and the Sandhound eats at leisure. Well, Mister Mocker?"

Mocker wet his lips, staring at the blood-red needle. He knew of that Martian animal called the Sandhound. "*You wouldn't!*" he said hoarsely.

The Sandhound jabbed the needle nearer. His laughter was thin. "Wouldn't I? Suppose you tell me where Tommy Duane is."

Mocker looked around at the little group—at Victoria, at Bozo, at the Sandhound. Something flickered in his eyes, a deeply masked triumph.

"You're aware," he said carefully, "that once you leave here, you won't be able to leave the city?"

The Sandhound frowned. "You don't control the airlock police, Mocker."

Mocker smiled disdainfully, confidently. "In this case I do," he said grimly. He looked at Victoria, who now stood huddled against the wall, white with hopelessness. His voice lashed out. "You murdered my right-hand man, Larens Spevans. I can prove it, because I know where the body is."

Victoria looked as if she were going to collapse. The Sandhound snapped, "Don't say anything."

Mocker said triumphantly, "And you two are her accomplices."

The Sandhound's gaze was steady. "I could ask you," he clipped out, "how you know all that, but I won't bother." He jabbed the needle closer, and without further preamble Mocker spoke.

"Twenty miles from here, in an abandoned glass igloo the sorogasters built. That's near Mason's oasis. You won't get that far, though."

The Sandhound searched his eyes. "All right. You're telling the truth." The little needle snapped back into the tip of the cane. The Sandhound made a jerking motion. "All right, lead the way. Once we're on the street you can follow your

own devices." Laughter shadowed his gray eyes.

Mocker willingly turned, clattered down the stairs, leading the little group. He left the house, unlatched the wall gate, and showed them out.

"Happy landings," he sneered. "The police will have all three of you within the hour."

TWO minutes later they were in the gyromobile and Bozo was chuckling. "Oh, yeah? He don't know us. Make it snappy, buddy! We got to make a funeral!"

"How'd you know that?" the Sandhound asked, his eyes abstractedly on Victoria, who was sitting limply in a corner of the cab.

"Know what? Oh! Just a hunch, just a hunch, chief."

The Sandhound turned to Victoria and dropped his hand over hers in a gesture she instinctively knew was friendly, for she made no move to draw away.

"You must be curious about my knowing of you and Tommy Duane," said the Sandhound.

She shrugged her shoulders listlessly. Her tone was bitter. "Of course. But it doesn't matter. You heard what Mocker said. He'll stop us. We won't even get outside the city. Then he'll charge me with murder—no matter where you put the body, they'll find it somehow, and then he'll have even a stronger hold over us. If you'd have let me alone, I'd have had Tommy released and we'd have gone back to Earth; and Mocker would let us alone, and we wouldn't have had to worry about the sand valley. I've got enough money for both of us to live on."

"You won't have that money until you're twenty-one," the Sandhound reminded her gently. "Your parents object to Tommy—which is the reason you ran away incognito to marry Tommy. And besides, from what I know of Tommy Duane, he wouldn't live on your money. He's batted around Mars and shifted for himself too long to become dependent on anybody, particularly the girl he loves. He's a full-fledged sandie. And why give Mocker the sand field when every glass manufacturer on Mars would sell his soul for it? Tag along with us, my dear, and you and

Tommy will have the only crystal-glass sand on Mars. You'll be selling glassware on Earth at ten times the price of the glassware this ferrous-oxide sand makes."

She turned limpid, unassured eyes on the Sandhound. "Why did Mocker tell us where Tommy was?"

"A safety gap for him. If by some mischance we got out of the city, he'd know where to find us."

"Then we *can* get out?"

The Sandhound's eyes sparkled. "We are," he said, settling comfortably back against the seat, "on the way to our own funeral."

Twenty minutes later, there was one of those strange, yet not infrequent cavalcades on the streets of Marsport . . . a Martian funeral.

It was evidently the funeral of a higher-caste Martian, as the procession extended for half a block. As it emerged from the unchaste native section of town into the business and show section, curious humans lined the streets, laughing and yelling at the antics of the stampers. The stampers were the "noise" makers, but in truth the only noise they made was that which vibrated through the earth, and was picked up in the feet of other Martians. The stampers leaped high, their roots trailing behind them like umbrellas as they dropped down to the paved avenue. The mourners, in long lines on either side of the coffins, shuffled rapidly along, garbed in the colors of a flowering desert. Three Martians ran back excitedly along the line, waving long *cupa* sticks over stampers, mourners, and coffins alike. The *cupa* sticks, it was known, made air currents which confused possible thirsty, evil spirits.

At the head of the procession was the chief stamper. Most of the time he walked quietly, but at times he felt moved to stamp a little.

The chief stamper led the procession clear across the city to the western airlock exit. Here the dome curved down, giving birth to a sudden "blister." The airlock door was in the blister, and next to the blister was the airlock-police station.

The captain of this police station had once before stopped a Martian funeral, and had faced demotion. The Martians, because of certain inherent abilities, made

excellent glass-workers. When word came that the coffins of a funeral had been opened for inspection, Dorian Mocker had faced a city-wide strike of Martians in his glass factories. In Marsport, no Martian funeral would hereafter be molested.

The police captain therefore ordered the airlock opened as the procession approached. The first coffin, born on vegetable backs, went through. The police captain nodded. He knew something about these high-class Martian funerals. The first coffin, of course, contained the soul of the deceased, the second, the mind, the third the body. If you didn't have the money, you just buried the body and hoped that the soul and mind would tag along.

The procession curled up in a spiral inside the airlock. The inner door closed. There was a ten-minute wait while the air pressure in the lock reduced down to six pounds to the square inch, so the sorogasters could accustom themselves again to their own atmosphere. Then the outer door opened, and the procession curled out.

That was all there was to it. The police captain closed the gate, and hoped that he could pull down the reward for capturing the three people Mocker had put out a warrant for a few minutes ago.

III

IT was night, and the Sandhound was perspiring inside his coffin. He was the corpse. He had his pressure suit on, and vainly tried to regulate the humidity inside the suit. But he was contented. The procession had gone through, and foresight had paid again.

Ten miles from the city, the procession came to a stop, and the coffin lid was unsealed. The Sandhound got out, jumped to the ground. Victoria came running toward him from her coffin. Her face looking ghastly inside her glass helmet. She was laughing.

"Steady!" the Sandhound snapped. She quieted with a barely audible gasp.

The stampers and mourners came crowding around the three of them now, their head-stomachs wobbling back and forth in what was certainly laughter. The Sandhound sought out the chief stamper,

gave him some bills as a final closing of the bargain.

Bozo was chafing for action. "Okay, let's go. Chief, it looks bad. I got a hunch they ain't treatin' the young fellow right."

The Sandhound gave him a nettled glance. Then he waved sharply to shut Bozo up. But Victoria witnessed the by-play. Her eyes filled with swift tears, but her chin came up jauntily as the Sandhound sternly flashed her a command with his eyes. His personality had that rare quality of reassuring, even while it carried a subtle warning within it.

They struck out over the sand wastes toward the paved road which would lead them to Mason's oasis. The funeral, of course, had been on the way to one of the secret cemeteries of the Martian, in order that a possibly suspicious police might be totally led astray.

They moved swiftly over the dipping sand hills, the Sandhound, as always, savoring his environment to the full, drawing every crumb of enjoyment from his surroundings. There was a magic in this Martian night, like a soft balm on thrumming nerves. With each footfall, a miniature cloud of sand-dust rose and hung in the thin atmosphere. The black face of the sky was flowered endlessly with the quiet points of deeply colored stars. Innumerable desert plants were underfoot, while imported cactus of the ocotillo, or coach-whip type was predominant. Also there was yucca.

They made the road. The going became swifter. Their pace in the shallow gravity was equivalent to a running pace on Earth.

The Sandhound carried his cane in his gloved hand.

After an hour and a half, they were bearing sharply south of Mason's oasis, which was mostly a native settlement, with occasional pressure-houses where human beings lived. *Cupa* trees, their limbs sticking out like swords guarding the precious water, clustered thickly and toweringly against the horizon.

It was Bozo who now set the pace, his scarred face worried.

A mile beyond Mason's oasis, they came upon the glass igloo. It was perched on a sand-dune, a domed affair made of

blocks of glass. Years before, a band of roving sorogasters, sensing the imminence of a sand-storm, had used their natural abilities to build the igloo as a protection. They secreted in their fibrous arms an acid which made sand flow like glass, without temperature. The resulting glass was poor in quality, brown, flaky, filled with air-bubbles. But there were thousands of such igloos on Mars, in varying states of preservation. Sandies, the red-skinned men who spend their lives on the Martian deserts looking for treasure, used them to sleep in, even to live in. The igloos could be hermetically sealed, and portable pressure-builders could raise the pressure to a Terrestrial level.

THE Sandhound stopped his companions in a swale a hundred feet removed from the igloo, face thoughtful. An aura of menace hung over the igloo. It had evidently been fitted up with a regular air-lock, for easy entrance and exit—easy for those who were friendly. But there was no easy entrance for friends of Tommy Duane.

As they stood there, a man in a pressure-suit came sauntering slowly around the nearer side of the igloo. The Sandhound drew his companions behind a clump of ocotillo. The sentry passed out of sight. The Sandhound's lips pursed grimly. He made a motion to Bozo.

"Okay, boss," Bozo said in satisfaction.

Bozo melted away into the shadows. A moment later, they saw him momentarily as he disappeared to the other side of the igloo.

Then, coming from the ridge, there were sounds of a scuffle. The Sandhound forced Victoria to a sitting position behind the ocotillo, and with a wordless command, bade her stay there.

With the deadly sureness of mind and body of that creature whose name the Sandhound had taken, he moved toward the igloo. He glided around the fourteen-foot structure, and was just in time to see Bozo raising his hands under the compulsion of the pressure-suited sentry's needle-gun.

"Okay," Bozo said grouchyly. "You got me. I been looking for Tommy Duane. You got him inside, eh?"

"Looking for Tommy Duane," the

sentry laughed mockingly. "You go about it in a clumsy enough fashion, all right."

"I'm not usually that clumsy," said Bozo, his eyes lidding. "I'm a pal of Tommy's—"

"You'll be nobody's pal when the boss finds out why you've been snooping around," the sentry promised. Still holding the gun on Bozo, he stepped to the door of the igloo, which was flush with the outer surface. As the Sandhound suspected, the igloo had been fitted up with an airlock for entrance and exit, as he saw when the sentry rapped on the door in a peculiar fashion. Almost immediately the outer door started opening.

THE Sandhound stepped up behind the sentry and with the hook of his cane smote him on that part of the bulging pressure suit which was in contact with the back of the neck. The sentry fell, and Bozo stooped quickly, grabbed one leg of the sentry, and flung him for a half dozen feet. The sentry lay in a quiet, tangled position.

The Sandhound picked up the needle-gun, and held it on Bozo, and Bozo went into the airlock followed by the Sandhound. He stood quietly, eyes narrowed.

The outer door of the airlock closed behind them. There was a partition of steel in front of them which had been built across the floor of the igloo and up to the high curving ceiling. This provided the airlock. Somebody beyond the steel partition had been operating the controls. Now the Sandhound, ostensibly the sentry with a prisoner in charge, heard the hissing, labored breath of a portable pressure-builder.

Beyond the inner steel door a voice grated, "Watcha got?"

"Snooper," said the Sandhound, trusting to the muffling qualities of his helmet to keep his imposture perfect until a proper time. "Pal o' Tommy Duane's."

Another voice, rough, irritated, said, "Aw, burn 'im. Watcha bringing him in here for? We got enough on our hands. Duane won't loosen."

The first voice said coldly, "I'm givin' orders around here, Winson. All right, pressure's up. Inner door opening. Come on in."

The pressure-builder stopped its asthmatic wheezing. The inner door started to open toward the Sandhound and his "captive".

A huge, rough-bearded man, with a cigarette hanging from his lip, stood at the entrance to the igloo proper. He looked Bozo up and down without much interest, then sent his glance back to the Sandhound.

The big man's jaw fell. "Say," he began, "what's goin' on here—?"

He must have realized what was going on at the last second. He wildly reached for his holstered gun; and Bozo kicked it out of his hand, with a motion of the foot too fast to follow by sight alone. With the same continuation of the motion, which required a highly precise sense of balance, Bozo lunged forward and planted his gauntleted hand smash on the big man's jaw. The big man crumbled.

Two other men were on their feet, then, clawing wildly at their guns. Bozo disarmed one while he tangled with the other. The disarmed man came fiercely for the Sandhound, who simply brought his cane perpendicular to his assailant's midriff. The man's pupils contracted to pinpoint size in that same second as the paralysis poison, carried in the blood-red needle on the tip of the Sandhound's cane, penetrated with singular rapidity through his body. He also fell, jerked violently and was still. The Sandhound grinned tightly.

Bozo was having his troubles. He was on his back, and his assailant was bringing the butt of his gun down toward Bozo's glass helmet, doubtless thinking to ruin Bozo's face even more than it was.

The Sandhound caught the man's hand in time, swung him around, and snapped his gloved fist forward for a lightning six inches. With cool eyes, he watched the man slowly flatten out, dead to the world.

Bozo came groggily to his feet. His eyes were worried. The Sandhound looked at him sharply. "What's wrong?"

Bozo was uneasy. "Got a hunch," he muttered. "We better work fast."

The Sandhound had seen that look on Bozo's face before. He looked swiftly around the igloo. Cigarette stubs were ground into the hard sand floor. There was a tank of water, a well-stocked larder.

Against the farther side of the dome, three sorogasters were rooted. The men who had kidnaped Tommy Duane had brought the sorogasters along to keep the air fresh, paying them for their trouble. The sorogasters, having their apathetic plant natures, did not much care what humans did among themselves.

Tommy Duane was bound hand and foot, in a sitting position near the sorogasters. His face was dead white, and canted to one side. He was unconscious. Bozo began to swear softly but luridly as he saw the burns, red and ugly, all the way up Tommy Duane's powerful arms. Blood, too, was coming from his fingernails, under which small slivers had been driven.

The Sandhound's lips thinned and his eyes burned coldly. Nonetheless, now was no time to indulge in recriminations. Torture had done more than make Tommy Duane faint. He was living now in an extreme condition of shock. He was colder than the night which still enveloped this half of the planet.

The Sandhound found a half dozen blankets, and wrapped the red-haired young sandie tight. He upended a chair and canted Duane's legs up at an angle. With the heel of both hands he pressed down on Duane's stomach where the huge aorta throbs like a second heart. The blood that had collected in a great pool in Duane's stomach was forced in a gushing flood through his upper body. Red touched his pale face. He tossed his head and moaned and his eyes opened.

"Keep him there," the Sandhound told Bozo. He moved toward the open air-lock.

Bozo followed nervously after him. "I better go with you to get the girl, boss. I got a hunch."

"Dorian Mocker?" said the Sandhound, frowning.

Bozo was helpless. He didn't know. "Stay here," the Sandhound said, and closed the inner door behind him. Inside, Bozo worked the controls which opened the outer door.

Outside, the night was quiet and cold and brooding. The sentry lay where Bozo had thrown him. His feet kicking up little clouds of red sand, the Sandhound went swiftly toward the clump

of ocotillo behind which he had instructed Victoria Adams to stay. The sentry's needle-gun dangled from his right hand.

Then it happened.

Dorian Mocker stepped from behind the clump of ocotillo and fired. A livid streak of flame cut across the intervening hundred feet.

IV

THE Sandhound's reflexes worked with perfect precision. Scarcely had the snapping sound of Mocker's gun died, than the Sandhound's own was up, the trigger pulled. But Mocker, to the Sandhound's eyesight, had suddenly become a shifting blur. The reason was obvious: Mocker's fire had not struck him directly, but had burned a hole through the right side of his bulging pressure suit, in front and back. Air was rushing out. Five pounds of pressure went with it. The effect would have been much the same if the Sandhound suddenly had been transported from Earth sea-level to the top of the highest mountain, sans pressure suit. He had double-vision. Control of his normal faculties was fast leaving him.

Worse, he felt a crushing outward force pushing from his lungs, his brain, his every blood vessel and artery. He felt the hot blood starting down his nostrils and out his ears, striving to escape from every pore in his skin. The ringing in his ears was that which preceded unconsciousness, and would put him entirely at Mocker's mercy. His pressure-suit was losing its rigidity like a punctured balloon, and the Sandhound's interior body pressure was pushing out with fourteen pounds to the square inch, while there was only six pounds of outside pressure to fight against it.

As he stood there, dizziness rapidly claiming him, he saw Mocker come charging toward him, his face gleeful with triumph. Mocker held his gun, and the Sandhound had no doubt that he would utilize his advantage to the fullest.

The Sandhound dropped to the sand. But not without purpose. There was the slim chance he could still salvage control of the situation. With the last of his fading strength, he pulled at the pressure-control lever in the little niche at the

hip of his punctured pressure-suit. Pulled it all the way up. The valve of his oxygen tank opened fully, releasing a stream of oxygen into his suit which had behind it a pressure of a hundred pounds to the square inch.

In some measure, the lost pressure was restored inside the suit. But almost more important in that critical moment, air rushed from the two holes in the Sandhound's suit with the force of a hydraulic drill. Those two full-driven streams of air gouged at the fine-as-dust sand, whirled it upward in huge billowing clouds through which the all-revealing starlight of the planet could not penetrate. The camouflage was perfect, enveloping both Mocker and the Sandhound.

The Sandhound was smiling a tight, twisted grin as he rolled to one side, evading the searing streak of flame which Mocker threw at him. A perfect miss. As he felt pressure building toward the equalization point, he trusted his feet.

He stood for a moment, orienting himself. Then he heard Mocker's withheld breath escaping. In that direction, air spurting forcefully from front and back, like a rocket ship gone wild, the Sandhound flung himself. His arms came together, closing around Mocker's body, cementing the man's arms to his sides.

MOCKER burst into a full-throated curse. The Sandhound bent the potentate backward, rolled him over a bent knee, and flung him for a dozen feet. The Sandhound followed him up, emerging from the dust cloud which had stood him in such good stead. He stood over Mocker, panting, but Mocker was dead to the world. The Sandhound scooped him up in his arms. He got to the igloo just as Bozo Dullard came bursting out.

The sweat of relief broke out on Bozo's ruined face as soon as he grasped the situation. Then he darted behind the clump of ocotillo and emerged carrying Victoria Adams. She was just regaining consciousness. It was evident that Mocker had come up behind her, struck her over the back of the neck, knocking her unconscious.

Inside the igloo, Tommy Duane was operating the airlock controls. As the Sandhound and Bozo stepped inside with

their burdens, Duane gave a choked little cry and took Victoria.

The Sandhound smiled and busied himself in plugging his punctured suit. By the time he had finished inserting little rubber "umbrellas" in the holes, Mocker was stirring. Duane crossed quickly toward him, his rocky face murderous. The Sandhound stopped him.

"He'll get what's coming to him," he promised. "Meantime—" He unzipped his suit on the side, reached into the evening attire he had been wearing and extracted the vial of crystal sand. Duane took it eagerly. Then he looked at the Sandhound in puzzled fashion.

"I've met you somewhere before," he said. "Over in Satterfield City, wasn't it? Name of Jones, wasn't it?"

"Or Smith," the Sandhound told him seriously.

Duane, his face still pale from the torture he had experienced, grinned foolishly. "Okay, if you want it that way. But thanks." He put an arm around Victoria Adams. Victoria looked the Sandhound straight in the eye.

"It still isn't so good for us, is it?" she demanded. "I've still got a murder hanging over my head."

"Murder!" Duane gasped.

She explained the events of the night to him, as far as she knew them. "I guess you knew the map to the location of the sand valley was in the vial," she told the Sandhound ashamedly.

The Sandhound turned back to Mocker, shrugging his shoulders. He prodded Mocker. The silver-haired man came to his elbows, still on his back. His eyes widened, and when he saw the needle gun, his lips writhed in furious helplessness.

"I'll have you all in jail for this, you fools!" he snarled. His eyes dilated when the Sandhound reached for his cane and the tiny blood-red needle was ejected. Blood fled his face. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to leave you in a preserved condition for the police to pick up when they get here from Marsport," the Sandhound said coldly. "But don't worry. They've got antidotes for the bite of the Sandhound, even if they haven't got antidotes to bring a dead man to life. A dead man you murdered."

"He murdered," Victoria Adams echoed blankly. Then she whirled on the Sandhound. "But I—"

"You fired at him and missed. Mocker fired at the same time through the window—and didn't miss. He killed Spevans with a needle-gun. There was a round hole in Spevans' forehead. Your gun would have made a triangle. Mocker didn't know you had the map of the location of the valley. He told Spevans you did. Then Mocker followed Spevans up and killed him. It was his intention to make an anonymous call to the police, send them to the shack where you were hiding out. The murder of Spevans would have been charged to you, and Mocker's hands would be clean. Luckily, Bozo and I arrived in time to give a hand."

Victoria's face cleared with relief. "That makes me feel better," she admitted. "But why would he—"

"Because Spevans was playing Mocker for a fool. Mocker only owned forty-nine shares in Martian Glassware, Inc. He controlled the corporation, however, because Spevans, his right-hand man, held two shares. Spevans voted the way Mocker wanted him to. That way they kept control. But of late, Spevans has been double-crossing Mocker by falling in with the other stockholders. They paid him handsomely to vote their way. Mocker was losing control of Martian Glassware. He had to get rid of Spevans. He had an arrangement with Spevans that when Spevans died, Spevans' two shares would revert to Mocker. They had been Mocker's originally, but Mocker gave them to—well, I won't go into that."

Sweat gleamed on Mocker's face. Fright grew in his eyes. "Who are you?" he said hoarsely. "You're the devil himself. You couldn't have known that."

"I know it all right," the Sandhound snapped. "The police will discover it, too, when they find Spevans' dead body in one of your upstairs closets. Try to worm your way out of that. . . ."

"In an upstairs closet!" Mocker blurted in horror. He leaped to his feet. "Spevans' body can't be there!"

"And yet, somehow," the Sandhound said sadly, "it is there."

Desperation was written on Mocker's face. He hurled himself forward. The Sandhound jabbed out with his cane. Victoria gave a little gasp and huddled against Tommy Duane as the glass potentate fell.

The Sandhound's smile was broad, his eyes sparkling with satisfaction. "And that," he remarked, "seems to be that. Mocker is done for, his game is over, and you two are free to go your way—with a fortune in sand!"

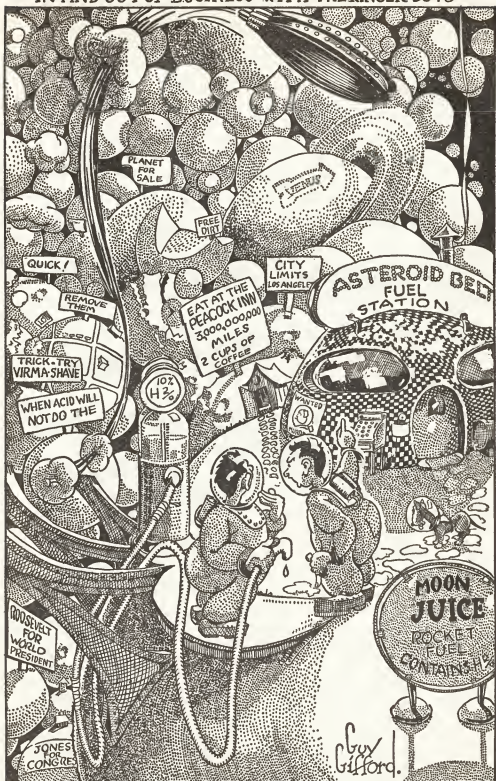
THREE hours later, two faultlessly-at-tired men, apparently little the worse for an evening's activities, strolled through the business and show section of Belleville, forty miles to the west of Marsport. They had the expressions of men who had performed a difficult task to their complete satisfaction. The Sandhound had slapped awake one of the sorogasters who occupied the igloo. The sorogaster had worked the controls and let the four humans out. At Mason's oasis, the Sandhound had anonymously radio-phoned the Marsport police about the body in Mocker's home, and had suggested where the police could find the murderer, adding other little important details which would clinch Mocker's downfall. They had left Victoria Adams and Tommy Duane in a pressure-hotel at Mason's oasis, and themselves had rented a planetomobile, and gone on to Belleville.

As they walked along, the Sandhound devoted himself to a study of Bozo Duldard's ruined face. The Sandhound's face indicated a modicum of disappointment, for Bozo was yawning—yawning so hugely that late passers-by stopped and looked at him in confoundment. Bozo was yawning, and his eyes were heavily lidded and he looked very, very tired.

"I'm sleepy," he mumbled in a drugged tone. "I got to sleep. I'm dead for sleep. I'm going to sleep and I ain't goin' to wake up until something happens. We got to find a hotel and a bed—and all I want is a week. *Just a week.*" His eyes swam with the ecstasy of his desire.

The Sandhound's grey eyes sparkled with the laughter of a man who enjoys life to the full. Swinging his cane jauntily, he led Bozo down the street and toward the hotel.

IN AND OUT OF BUSINESS WITH THE RINGER BOYS



"FORTY YEARS TO VENUS AND BACK AND YOU GIVE THAT BUNCH CREDIT!"



Illustration by Bob Leydenfrost

THE BLUE BEHEMOTH

By LEIGH BRACKETT

Shannon's Imperial Circus was a jinxed space-carny leased for a mysterious tour of the inner worlds. It made a one-night pitch on a Venusian swamp-town—to find that death stalked it from the jungle in a tiny ball of flame.

BUCKY SHANNON leaned forward across the little hexagonal table. He knocked over the pitcher of *thil*, but it didn't matter. The pitcher was empty. He jabbed me in the breastbone with his forefinger, not very hard. Not hard enough to jar the ribs clean loose, just enough to spring them.

"We," he said, "are broke. We are

finished, through. Washed up and down the drain." He added, as an afterthought, "Destitute."

I looked at him. I said sourly, "You're kidding!"

"Kidding." Shannon put his elbows on the table and peered at me through a curtain of very blond hair that was trying hard to be red. "He says I'm kid-



ding! With Shannon's Imperial Circus, the Greatest Show in Space, plastered so thick with attachments . . ."

"It's no more plastered than you are." I was sore because he'd been a lot quicker grabbing the pitcher. "The Greatest Show in Space. Phooey! I've wet-nursed Shannon's Imperial Circus around the Triangle for eleven years, and I know. It's lousy, it's mangy, it's broken-down! Nothing works, from the ship to the roustabouts. In short, it stinks!"

I must have had the pitcher oftener than I thought. Nobody insults Buckhalter Shannon's Imperial Circus to Buckhalter Shannon's face unless he's tired and wants a long rest in a comfy fracture-frame.

Shannon got up. He got up slowly. I had plenty of time to see his grey-green eyes get sleepy, and hear the quarter-Earth-blood Martian girl wailing about love over by the battered piano, and watch the slanting cat-eyes of the little dark people at the tables swing round toward us, pleased and kind of hungry.

I had plenty of time to think how I only weigh one-thirty-seven to Shannon's one-seventy-five, and how I'm not as young as I used to be.

I said, "Bucky. Hold on, fella. I . . ."

Somebody said, "Excuse me, gentlemen. Is one of you Mister Buckhalter Shannon?"

Shannon put his hands down on his belt. He closed his eyes and smiled pleasantly and said, very gently:

"Would you be collecting for the feed bill, or the fuel?"

I shot a glance at the newcomer. He'd saved me from a beating, even if he was a lousy bill-collector; and I felt sorry for him. Bucky Shannon settled his shoulders and hips like a dancer.

The stranger was a little guy. He even made me look big. He was dressed in dark-green synthesilk, very conservative. There was a powdering of grey in his hair and his skin was pink, soft, and shaved painfully clean. He had the kind of a face that nice maiden-ladies will trust with their last dime. I looked for his strong-arm squad.

There didn't seem to be any. The little guy looked at Shannon with pale blue eyes like a baby, and his voice was softer than Bucky's.

He said, "I don't think you understand."

I felt cold, suddenly, between the shoulders. Somebody scraped a chair back. It sounded like he'd ripped the floor open, it was so quiet. I got my brassies on, and my hands were sweating. Bucky Shannon sighed, and let his fist start traveling, a long, deceptive arc.

Then I saw what the little guy was holding in his hand.

I yelled and knocked the table over into Bucky. It made a lot of noise. It knocked him sideways and down, and the little dark men jumped up, quivering and showing their teeth. The Martian girl screamed.

Bucky heaved the table off his lap and cursed me. "What's eating you, Jig? I'm not going to hurt him."

"Shut up," I said. "Look what he's got there. Money!"

The little guy looked at me. He hadn't turned a hair. "Yes," he said. "Money. Quite a lot of it. Would you gentlemen permit me to join you?"

Bucky Shannon got up. He grinned his pleasantest grin. "Delighted. I'm Shannon. This is Jig Bentley, my business manager." He looked down at the table. "I'm sorry about that. Mistaken identity."

The little guy smiled. He did it with his lips. The rest of his face stayed placid and babyish, almost transparent. I realized with a start that it wasn't transparent at all. It was the most complete dead-pan I ever met, and you couldn't see into those innocent blue eyes any more than you could see through sheet metal.

I didn't like him. I didn't like him at all. But he had money. I said, "Howdy. Let's go find a booth. These Marshies make me nervous, looking like hungry cats at a mouse-hole."

The little guy nodded. "Excellent idea. My name is Beamish. Simon Beamish. I wish to—ah—charter your circus."

I LOOKED at Bucky. He looked hungrier than the Marshies did. We didn't say anything until we got Beamish into a curtained booth with a fresh pitcher of *this* on the table. Then I cleared my throat.

"What exactly did you have in mind, Mr. Beamish?"

Beamish sipped his drink, made a polite

face, and put it down. "I have independent means, gentlemen. It has always been my desire to lighten the burden of life for those less fortunate . . ."

Bucky got red around the ears. "Just a minute," he murmured, and started to get up. I kicked him under the table.

"Shut up, you lug. Let Mister Beamish finish."

He sat down, looking like a mean dog waiting for the postman. Beamish ignored him. He went on, quietly,

"I have always held that entertainment, of the right sort, is the most valuable aid humanity can have in its search for the alleviation of toil and boredom . . ."

I said, "Sure, sure. But what was your idea?"

"There are many towns along the Venusian frontiers where no entertainment of the—*proper* sort has been available. I propose to remedy that. I propose to charter your circus, Mister Shannon, to make a tour of several settlements along the Tehara Belt."

Bucky had relaxed. His grey-green eyes began to gleam. He started to speak, and I kicked him again.

"That would be expensive, Mister Beamish," I said. "We'd have to cancel several engagements . . ."

He looked at me. I was lying, and he knew it. But he said,

"I quite understand that. I would be prepared . . ."

The curtains were yanked back suddenly. Beamish shut up. Bucky and I glared at the head and shoulders poking in between the drapes.

It was Gow, our zoo-man—a big, ugly son-of-a-gun from a Terran colony on Mercury. I was there once. Gow looks a lot like the scenery—scowling, unapproachable, and tough. His hands, holding the curtains apart, had thick black hair on them and were not much larger than the hams of a Venusian swamp-rhino.

He said, "Boss, Gertrude's actin' up again."

"Gertrude be blowed," growled Bucky. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Gow's black eyes were unpleasant. "I'm tellin' you, Boss, Gertrude ain't happy. She ain't had the right food. If something . . ."

I said, "That'll all be taken care of, Gow. Run along now."

He looked at me like he was thinking it wouldn't take much timber to fit me for a coffin. "Okay! But Gertrude's unhappy. She's lonesome, see? And if she don't get happier pretty soon I ain't sure your tin-pot ship'll hold her."

He pulled the curtains to and departed. Bucky Shannon groaned. Beamish cleared his throat and said, rather stiffly,

"Gertrude?"

"Yeah. She's kind of temperamental."

Bucky took a quick drink. I finished for him.

"She's the star attraction of our show, Mr. Beamish. A real blue-swamp Venusian *cansin*. The only other one on the Triangle belongs to Savitt Brothers, and she's much smaller than Gertrude."

She was also much younger, but I didn't go into that. Gertrude may be a little creaky, but she's still pretty impressive. I only hoped she wouldn't die on us, because without her we'd have a sicker-looking circus than even I could stand.

Beamish looked impressed. "A *cansin*. Well, well! The mystery surrounding the origin and species of the *cansin* is a fascinating subject. The extreme rarity of the animal . . ."

We were getting off the subject. I said tactfully, "We'd have to have at least a hundred U.C.'s."

It was twice what we had any right to ask. I was prepared to dicker. Beamish looked at me with that innocent dead pan. For a fraction of a second I thought I saw something back of his round blue eyes, and my stomach jumped like it was shot. Beamish smiled sweetly.

"I'm not much of a bargainer. One hundred Universal Credits will be agreeable to me." He dragged out a roll as big as my two fists, peeled off half a dozen credit slips, and laid them on the table.

"By way of a retainer, gentleman. My attorney and I will call on you in the morning with a contract and itinerary. Good night."

We said good night, trying not to drool. Beamish went away. Bucky made grab for the money, but I beat him to it.

"Scram," I said. "There are guys waiting for this. Big guys with clubs. 'Here.' I gave him a small-denomination slip I'd been holding out. 'We can get lushed enough on this.'"

Shannon has a good vocabulary. He

used it. When he got his breath back he said suddenly,

"Beamish is pulling some kind of a game."

"Yeah."

"It may be crooked."

"Sure. And he may be screwball and on the level. For Pete's sake!" I yelled. "You want to sit here till we all dry up and blow away?"

Shannon looked at me, kind of funny. He looked at the bulge in my tunic where the roll was. He raked back his thick light hair.

"Yeah," he said. "I hope there'll be enough left to bribe the jury." He poked his head outside. "Hey, boy! More *thildatum*!"

IT was pretty late when we got back to the broken-down spaceport where Shannon's Imperial Circus was crouching beneath its attachments. Late as it was, they were waiting for us. About twenty of them, sitting around and smoking and looking very ugly.

It was awfully lonesome out there, with the desert cold and restless under the two moons. There's a smell to Mars, like something dead and dried long past decay, but still waiting. An unhappy smell. The blown red dust gritted in my teeth.

Bucky Shannon walked out into the glare of the light at the entrance to the roped-off space around the main lock. He was pretty steady on his feet. He waved and said, "Hiya, boys."

They got up off the steps, and the packing cases, and came toward us. I grinned and got into my brassies. We felt we owed those boys a lot more than money. It grates on a man's pride to have to sneak in and out of his own property through the sewage lock. This was the first time in weeks we'd come in at the front door.

I waved the money in their faces. That stopped them. Very solemnly, Bucky and I checked the bills, paid them, and pocketed the receipts. Bucky yawned and stretched sleepily.

"Now?" he said.

"Now," I said.

We had a lot of fun. Some of the boys inside the ship came out to join in. We raised a lot of dust and nobody got killed, quite. We all went home happy. They

had their money, and we had their blood.

The news was all over the ship before we got inside. The freaks and the green girl from Tethys who could roll herself like a hoop, and Zurt the muscle man from Jupiter, and all the other assorted geeks and kinkers and joeys that make up the usual corny carnies were doing nip-ups in the passageways and drooling over the thought of steer and toppings.

Bucky Shannon regarded them possessively, wiping blood from his nose. "They're good guys, Jig. Swell people. They stuck by me, and I've rewarded them."

I said, "Sure," rather sourly. Bucky hiccupped.

"Let's go see Gertrude."

I didn't want to see Gertrude. I never got over feeling funny going into the brute tank, especially at night or out in space. I'm a city guy, myself. The smell and sound of wildness gives me goose bumps. But Bucky was looking stubborn, so I shrugged.

"Okay. But just for a minute. Then we go beddy-bye."

"You're a pal, Jif. Bes' li't' guy inna worl' . . ."

The fight had just put the topper on him. I was afraid he'd fall down the ladder and break his neck. That's why I went along. If I hadn't . . . Oh, well, what's a few nightmares among friends?

It was dark down there in the tank. Way off at the other end, there was a dim glow. Gow was evidently holding Gertrude's hand. We started down the long passageway between the rows of cages and glassed-in tanks and compression units.

Our footsteps sounded loud and empty on the iron floor. I wasn't near as happy as Shannon, and my skin began to crawl a little. It's the smell, I think; rank and sour and wild. And the sound of them, breathing and rustling in the dark, with the patient hatred walled around them as strong as the cage bars.

Bucky Shannon lurched against me suddenly. I choked back a yell, and then wiped the sweat off my forehead and cursed. The scream came again. A high, ragged, whistling screech like nothing this side of hell, ripping through the musty darkness. Gertrude, on the wailing wall.

It had been quiet. Not every brute in

the place let go at the same time. My stomach turned clear over. I called Gertrude every name I could think of, and I couldn't hear myself doing it. Presently a great metallic clash nearly burst my eardrums, and the beasts shut up. Gow had them nicely conditioned to that gong.

BUT they didn't quiet down. Not really. They were uneasy. You can feel them inside you when they're uneasy. I think that's why I'm scared of them. They make me feel like I'm not human as I thought—like I wanted to put my back-hair up and snarl. Yeah. They were uneasy that night, all of a sudden . . .

Gow glared at us as we came up into the lantern light. "She's gettin' worse," he said. "She's lonesome."

"That's tough," said Bucky Shannon. His grey-green eyes looked like an owl's. He swayed slightly. "That's sure tough." He snickered.

I looked at Gertrude. Her cage is the biggest and strongest in the tank and even so she looked as though she could break it open just taking a deep breath. I don't know if you've ever seen a *cansin*. There's only two of them on the Triangle. If you haven't, nothing I can say will make much difference.

They're what the brain gang calls an "end of evolution." Seems old Dame Nature had an idea that didn't jell. The *cansins* were pretty successful for a while, it seems, but something gummed up the works and now there's only a few left, way in the deep-swamp country, where even the Venusians hardly ever go. Living fossils.

I wouldn't know, of course, but Gertrude looks to me like she got stuck some place between a dinosaur and a grizzly bear, with maybe a little bird blood thrown in. Anyway, she's big.

I couldn't help feeling sorry for her. She was crouched in the cage with her hands—yeah, hands—hanging over her knees and her snaky head sunk into her shoulders, looking out. Just looking. Not at anything. Her eyes were way back in deep horny pits, like cold green fire.

The lantern light was yellow on her blue-black skin, but it made the mane, or crest, of coarse wide scales that ran from between her eyes clear down to her flat, short tail,

burn all colors. She looked like old Mother Misery herself, from way back before time began.

Gow said softly, "She wants a mate. And somebody better get her one."

Bucky Shannon sniffled again. I said irritably, "Be reasonable, Gow! Nobody's ever seen a male *cansin*. There may not even be any."

Gertrude screamed again. She didn't move, not even to raise her head. The sadness just built up inside her until it had to come out. That close, the screech was deafening, and it turned me all limp and cold inside. The loneliness, the sheer stark, simple pain . . .

Bucky Shannon began to cry. I snarled, "You'll have to snap her out of this, Gow. She's driving the rest of 'em nuts."

He hammered on his gong, and things quieted down again. Gow stood looking out over the tank, sniffing a little, like a hound. Then he turned to Gertrude.

"I saved her life," he said. "When we bought her out of Hanak's wreck and everybody thought she was too hurt to live, I saved her. I know her. I can do things with her. But this time . . ."

He shrugged. He was huge and tough and ugly, and his voice was like a woman's talking about a sick child.

"This time," he said, "I ain't sure."

"Well for Pete's sake, do what you can. We got a charter, and we need her." I took Shannon's arm. "Come to bed, Bucky darlin'."

He draped himself over my shoulder and we went off. Gow didn't look at us. Bucky sobbed.

"You were right, Jig," he mumbled. "Circus is no good. I know it. But it's all I got. I love it, Jig. Unnerstan' me? Like Gow there with Gertrude. She's ugly and no good, but he loves her. I love . . ."

"Sure, sure," I told him. "Stop crying down my neck."

We were a long way from the light, then. The cages and tanks loomed high and black over us. It was still. The secret, uneasy motion all around us and the scruffing of our feet only made it stiller.

Bucky was almost asleep on me. I started to slap him. And then the mist rose up out of the darkness in little lazy coils, sparkling faintly with blue, cold fire.

I yelled, "Gow! Gow, the Vapor snakes! Gow—for God's sake!"

I started to run, back along the passageway. Bucky weighed on me, limp and heavy. The noise burst suddenly in a deafening hell of moans and roars and shrieks, packed in tight by the metal walls, and above it all I could hear Gertrude's lonely, whistling scream.

I thought, "*Somebody's down here. Somebody let 'em out. Somebody wants to kill us!*" I tried to yell again. It strangled in my throat. I sobbed, and the sweat was thick and cold on me.

One of Bucky's dragging, stumbling feet got between mine. We fell. I rolled on top of him, covering his face, and buried my own face in the hollow of his shoulder.

The first snake touched me. It was like a live wire, sliding along the back of my neck. I screamed. It came down along my cheek, hunting my mouth. There was more of them, burning me through my clothes.

Bucky moaned and kicked under me. I remember hanging on and thinking, "This is it. This is it, and oh God, I'm scared!"

Then I went out.

II

KANZA the Martian croaker, was bending over me when I woke up. His little brown face was crinkled with laughter. He'd lost most of his teeth, and he gummed *tha'-weed*. It smelt.

"You pretty, Mis' Jig," he giggled. "You funny like hell."

He slapped some cold greasy stuff on my face. It hurt. I cursed him and said, "Where's Shannon? How is he?"

"Mis' Bucky okay. You save life. You big hero, Mis' Jig. Mis' Gow come nick-uh-time, get snakes. You hero. Haw! You funny like hell!"

I said, "Yeah," and pushed him away and got up. I almost fell down a couple of times, but presently I made it to the mirror over the washstand—I was in my own cell—and I saw what Kanza meant. The damned snakes had done a good job. I looked like I was upholstered in Scotch plaid. I felt sick.

Bucky Shannon opened the door. He looked white and grim, and there was a big burn across his neck. He said:

"Beamish is here with his lawyer."

I picked up my shirt. "Right with you."

Kanza went out, still giggling. Bucky closed the door.

"Jig," he said, "those vapor worms were all right when we went in. Somebody followed us down and let them out. On purpose."

I hurt all over. I growled, "With that brain, son, you should go far. Nobody saw anything, of course?" Bucky shook his head.

"Question is, Jig, who wants to kill us, and why?"

"Beamish. He realizes he's been gyped."

"One hundred U.C.'s," said Bucky softly, "for a few lousy swampedge mining camps. It stinks, Jig. You think we should back out?"

I shrugged. "You're the boss man. I'm only the guy that beats off the creditors."

"Yeah," Bucky said reflectively. "And I hear starvation isn't a comfortable death. Okay, Jig. Let's go sign." He put his hand on the latch and looked at my feet. "And—uh—Jig, I . . ."

I said, "Skip it. The next time, just don't trip me up, that's all!"

We had a nasty trip to Venus. Gertrude kept the brute tank on edge, and Gow, on the rare occasions he came up for air, went around looking like a disaster hoping to happen. To make it worse, Zurt the Jovian strong-man got hurt during the take-off, and the Mercurian cave-cat had kittens.

Nobody would have minded that, only one of 'em had only four legs. It lived just long enough to scare that bunch of superstitious dopes out of their pants. Circus people are funny that way.

Shannon and I did a little quiet sleuthing, but it was a waste of time. Anybody in the gang might have let those electric worms out on us. It didn't help any to know that somebody, maybe the guy next to you at dinner, was busy thinking ways to kill you. By the time we hit Venus, I was ready to do a Brodie out the refuse chute.

Shannon set the crate down on the edge of Nahru, the first stop on our itinerary. I stood beside him, looking out the ports at the scenery. It was Venus, all right. Blue mud and thick green jungle and rain, and a bunch of ratty-looking plastic

shacks huddling together in the middle of it. Men in slickers were coming out for a look.

I saw Beamish's sleek yacht parked on a cradle over to the left, and our router's runabout beside it. Bucky Shannon groaned.

"A blue one, Jig. A morgue if I ever saw one!"

I snarled, "What do you want, with this lousy dog-and-pony show!" and went out. He followed. The gang was converging on the lock, but they weren't happy. You get so you can feel those things. The steamy Venus heat was already sneaking into the ship.

While we passed the hatchway to the brute tank, I could hear Gertrude, screaming.

THE canvasman were busy setting up the annex, slopping and cursing in the mud. The paste brigade was heading for the shacks. Shannon and I stood with the hot rain running off our slickers, looking.

I heard a noise behind me and looked around. Ahra the Nahali woman was standing in the mud with her arms up and her head thrown back, and her triangular mouth open like a thirsty dog. She didn't have anything on but her blue-green, hard scaled hide, and she was chuckling. It didn't sound nice.

You find a lot of Nahali people in side-shows, doing tricks with the electric power they carry in their own bodies. They're Venusian middle-swampers, they're not human, and they never forget it.

Ahra opened her slitted red eyes and looked at me and laughed with white reptilian teeth.

"Death," she whispered. "Death and trouble. The jungle tells me. I can smell it in the swamp wind."

The hot rain sluiced over her. She shivered, and the pale skin under her jaw pulsed like a toad's, and her eyes were red.

"The deep swamps are angry," she whispered. "Something has been taken. They are angry, and I smell death in the wind!"

She turned away, laughing, and I cursed her, and my stomach was tight and cold. Bucky said,

"Let's eat if they have a bar in this dump."

We weren't half way across the mud puddle that passed as a landing field when a man came out of a shack on the edge of the settlement. We could see him plainly, because he was off to one side of the crowd.

He fell on his knees in the mud, making noises. It took him three or four tries to get our names out clear enough to understand.

Bucky said, "Jig—it's Sam Kapper."

We started to run. The crowd, mostly big unshaken miners, wheeled around to see what was happening. People began to close in on the man who crawled and whimpered in the mud.

Sam Kapper was a hunter, supplying animals to zoos and circuses and carnivals. He'd given us good deals a couple of times, when we weren't too broke, and we were pretty friendly.

I hadn't seen him for three seasons. I remembered him as a bronzed, hard-bitten guy, lean and tough as a twist of tung wire. I felt sick, looking down at him.

Bucky started to help him up. Kapper was crying, and he jerked all over like animals I've seen that were scared to death. Some guy leaned over and put a cigarette in his mouth and lighted it for him.

I was thinking about Kapper, then, and I didn't pay much attention. I only caught a glimpse of the man's face as he straightened up. I didn't realize until later that he looked familiar.

We got Kapper inside the shack. It turned out to be a cheap bar, with a couple of curtained booths at the back. We got him into one and pulled the curtain in a lot of curious faces. Kapper dragged hard on the cigarette. The man that gave it to him was gone.

Bucky said gently, "Okay, Sam. Relax. What's the trouble?"

KAPPER tried to straighten up. He hadn't shaved. The lean hard lines of his face had gone slack and his eyes were bloodshot. He was covered with mud, and his mouth twitched like a sick old man's.

He said thickly, "I found it. I said I'd do it, and I did. I found it and brought it out."

The cigarette stub fell out of his mouth. He didn't notice it. "Help me," he said

simply. "I'm scared." His mouth drooled.

"I got it hidden. They want to find out, but I won't tell 'em. It's got to go back. Back where I found it. I tried to take it, but they wouldn't let me, and I was afraid they'd find it . . ."

He reached suddenly and grabbed the edge of the table. "I don't know how they found out about it, but they did. I've got to get it back. I've got to . . ."

Bucky looked at me. Kapper was blue around the mouth. I was scared, suddenly. I said, "Get what back where?"

Bucky got up. "I'll get a doctor," he said. "Stick with him." Kapper grabbed his wrist. Kapper's nails were blue and the cords in his hands stood out like guy wires.

"Don't leave me. Got to tell you—where it is. Got to take it back. Promise you'll take it back." He gasped and struggled over his breathing.

"Sure," said Bucky. "Sure, we'll take it back. What is it?"

Kapper's face was horrible. I felt sick, listening to him fight for air. I wanted to go for a doctor anyway, but somehow I knew it was no use. Kapper whispered,

"*Cansin*. Male. Only one. You don't know . . .! Take him back."

"Where is it, Sam?"

I reached across Bucky suddenly and jerked the curtain back. Beamish was standing there. Beamish, bent over, with his ear cocked. Kapper made a harsh strangling noise and fell across the table.

Beamish never changed expression. He didn't move while Bucky felt Kapper's pulse. Bucky didn't need to say anything. We knew.

"Heart?" said Beamish finally.

"Yeah," said Bucky. He looked as bad as I felt. "Poor Sam."

I looked at the cigarette stub smoldering on the table. I looked at Beamish with his round dead baby face. I climbed over Shannon and pushed Beamish suddenly down into his lap.

"Keep this guy here till I get back," I said.

Shannon stared at me. Beamish started to get indignant. "Shut up," I told him. "We got a contract." I yanked the curtains shut and walked over to the bar.

I began to notice something, then. There were quite a lot of men in the place. At

first glance they looked okay—a hard-faced, muscular bunch of miners in dirty shirts and high boots.

Then I looked at their hands. They were dirty enough. But they never did any work in a mine, on Venus or anywhere else.

The place was awfully quiet, for that kind of a place. The bartender was a big pot-bellied swamp-edger with pale eyes and thick white hair coiled up on top of his bullet head. He was not happy.

I leaned on the bar. "*Lhak*," I said. He poured it, sullenly, out of a green bottle. I reached for it, casually.

"That guy we brought in," I said. "He sure has a skinful. Passed out cold. What's he been spiking his drinks with?"

"*Selak*," said a voice in my ear. "As if you didn't know."

I turned. The man who had given Kapper the cigarette was standing behind me. And I remembered him, then.

CIRCUS people get around a lot, and the Law supplies us with Wanted sheets. I remembered this guy from the last batch they handed us on Mars. Melak Thompson was his name, and he had a reputation.

He had a face you wouldn't forget. Dark and kind of handsome, with the Drylander blood showing in the heavy bones and the tilted green eyes. His mouth was smiling and brutal. He nodded at the booth.

"Let's take a walk," he said.

We took a walk. The men sitting at the dirty tables were still silent, and still not miners. I began to sweat.

The booth was a little crowded with us all in there. I sat jammed up against Sam Kapper's body. Bucky Shannon's grey-green eyes were sleepy, and there was a vein beating on his forehead.

Beamish said to Melak, "Kapper's dead. Dead, without talking."

"That's tough." Melak shook his dark head. "We was gentle with him."

"Yeah," I said. Kapper had been a good guy, and I was mad. "Feed anybody enough *selak*, and you can afford to be. It's a dirty death."

Selak's made from a Venusian half-cousin of henbane, which is what scopolamine comes from. It has a terrific effect on the

heart. And Kapper had simply torn himself apart trying to keep from talking while he was under the influence.

Bucky Shannon made a slow, ugly move to get up. Beamish said,

"Sit down."

There was something in his voice and his bland blue eyes. Shannon sat down. Melak was looking at Beamish, still grinning.

"Well," he said, "I guess your idea was pretty good after all."

I had a sudden inspiration. The burns were still sore on my body, and Kapper's tortured face was close to mine, and I took a wild shot at something I wasn't even sure I saw.

"Yeah," I said. "A swell idea. Why did you try so hard to butch it, Melak?"

He stopped grinning. Beamish looked forward a little. My tongue stuck in my mouth, but I managed to say.

"You get it, Bucky. A male *cansin*, Kapper said. The only one in captivity, maybe even on Venus. Worth its weight in credit slips. That's why Beamish was so happy to overpay us to get us out here—because he thought Gertrude could find her boy friend fast, even if Kapper didn't talk."

I turned to Melak again. "A swell idea. Why did you have those vapor snakes turned loose on us? Did you think Kapper was enough?"

He struck me, pretty hard, across the mouth. My head banged back against the booth wall and for a minute I couldn't see anything but spangles of fire shooting around. I heard Beamish say, from a great distance,

"How about it, Melak?"

It was awfully still in the booth. I swallowed some blood and blinked my eyes clear enough to see Bucky Shannon poised across the table like a bow starting to unbend. And suddenly, somewhere far off over the drum of rain on the flimsy roof, there began to be noises.

I hadn't been comfortable up till then. I'm no Superman, nor one of those guys you read about who can stare Death in the eye and shatter him with a light laugh.

But all of a sudden I was afraid. Afraid so that all the fear I'd felt before was nothing. And it was funny, too. I didn't know what it was, then, but I knew what

it wasn't. It wasn't Beamish or Melak or those hard guys beyond the curtains, or even Kapper's body pressed up against me.

I didn't know what it was. But I wanted to get down on the floor and hide myself in a crack, like a cockroach.

THE others felt it, too. I remember the sweat standing out on Bucky Shannon's forehead, and the sudden tightening of Beamish's jaw, and the glitter in Melak's green eyes.

Beyond the curtains there was an uneasy stirring of feet. The confused, distant noise grew louder. Somewhere, not very far away, a woman began to scream.

Beamish said softly, "You dirty double-crossing rat." His face was still dead-pan, only now it was like something beaten out of iron. His hands were out of sight under the table.

Melak smiled. I could feel his body shift and tense beside me. "Sure," he said. "I double-crossed you. Why not? I planted a guy in the circus hammer gang and he crawled in the sewage lock and tried to get these punks. I'm glad now he bungled it. Kapper had guts."

Beamish whispered, "You're a fool. You don't know what you're playing with. I've done research, and I do."

"Too bad you wasted the time," said Melak. "Because you're through."

He threw himself suddenly aside, lifting the table hard into Beamish. The curtains ripped away and he rolled in them, twisting like a snake. I yelled to Bucky and dropped flat. Beamish had drawn a gun under the table. The blast of it seared my face.

The next second four heavy blasters spoke at once. Beamish's gun dropped on the floor. Then it was quiet again, and I could hear the woman screaming, outside in the beating rain.

Melak got up. "Sure I double-crossed you," he said softly. "Why should I split with anybody? Nobody knows about it but us. Kapper couldn't send word from the swamps when he caught it, and he couldn't send word from here because he wasn't let.

"That critter'll bring anything I ask for it. Why should I split with you?"

Beamish didn't answer. I don't think Melak thought he would.

The noise from outside was getting louder. Bucky groaned.

"It's coming from the pitch, Jig. Trouble. We've got to . . ."

The table was yanked from over us. We got up off our knees. Melak looked at us. He was shaking a little and his green eyes were mean.

"I don't think," he said, "I really need you guys around, either." He jerked his head suddenly. "Cripes, I wish that dame would shut up!"

It was getting on my nerves, too—that monotonous, sawing screech. Melak stepped aside. "Get 'em, boys. I don't want 'em dragging their outfit down on our necks."

Four blaster barrels came up. My insides came up with them. I was way beyond anything, then—even panic.

Gow burst in through the doorway.

He was soaked to the skin, tattered, bleeding, and wild-eyed. He yelled, "Boss! Gertrude . . ." Then he saw the guns and stopped.

It was very still in the place. Outside there was sound rising like a sullen tide against the walls. The woman's screaming became something not human, and then stopped, short.

Gow said, almost absently, "Gertrude went nuts. We'd brought her cage up from the tank for the show and she—broke out. There wasn't nothin' we could do. She busted a lot of cages and then disappeared."

Melak snarled something, I don't know what. The wall behind Gow jarred, buckled, and split open around the doorway. Bamboo fragments clattered on the floor. Somebody yelled, and a blaster went off.

Gertrude stood in the splintered opening. She looked at us with cold, mad green eyes, towering huge and blue against the low roof, her hands swinging and her crest erect.

She let go one wild, whistling screech and came straight toward the booth. Bucky Shannon touched my arm.

"Climb into your brassies, kid," he muttered. "Heres our chance!"

I caught his shoulder. He followed the line of my pointing, and I felt him tremble.

Gertrude was coming at us like a rocket express. Behind her wet and glistening

from the hot rain, came three more just like her.

III

WE scattered, all of us, hunting for a way out. There was only one door leading to the back, and it was stoppered tight with men cursing and fighting to get through. Gow was crouched in a corner by the splintered wall.

I pulled Bucky along, thinking we might get in back of the *cansins* and sneak out. I wondered what they wanted. And I wondered where in heck you could hide a thing as big as Gertrude and keep anybody from finding out.

Somebody screamed briefly. I saw one of the strange *cansins* toss the bartender aside like a dry twig. Gow rose up in front of me with a queer staring look in his eyes.

"Somethin's wrong," he said. "All wrong. I . . ." His mouth twitched. He turned sharply and started to scramble through the wrecked hall. Bucky and I were right on his heels. I think Melak and some of his lobbygows were crowding us, but nobody was thinking about things like that any more.

I knew what was eating Gow. The fear that had looked out of Kapper's eyes. The fear that was riding me. Fear that had nothing to do with anything physical.

Bucky cursed and stumbled beside me. And suddenly the four *cansins* let go a tremendous thundering scream. The hair rose on my neck, and I turned to look. I just had to.

Gertrude had turned away from the booth. They stood, the four of them, their huge black shoulders touching, their crests like rows of petrified flame, staring at what Gertrude held in her arms.

It was Kapper's body.

Slowly, with infinite gentleness, she began to strip him. He hung loose in the cradle of one great arm, his flesh showing blue-white against her blueness. Her free hand ripped his clothes away like things made of paper.

I don't know why nobody tried to shoot the beasts after the first second. Sheer panic, I guess. We could have killed them all, then. But we just stood looking, fas-

cinated by the slow, intent baring of Kapper's body.

And the strange fear. It was on us all.

Kapper lay naked in her black arms. She raised him slowly over her head, her eyes blind green fires deep under bony brows. The others drew closer, shivering, and I could hear them whimper.

Strangers from the deep swamps with no stink of man on them. I thought of the Nahali woman laughing in the hot rain. Death from the deep swamps, because something had been taken, and they were angry.

There was a little black box strapped to Kapper's thin white belly.

Gertrude shifted her hands a little. The blood hammered in my ears. I was sick. I didn't want to look any more. I couldn't help it. Bucky Shannon caught a hard, sobbing breath.

Gertrude broke Sam Kapper's body in two.

I CAN still hear the noise it made. The blood ran dark and sluggish down her arms. It worried me that Kapper's face didn't change expression. The little black box on his belly split with the rest of him.

Something rose out of it. Something no bigger than my forefinger that carried a cold green blaze around it like a ball of St. Elmo's fire.

Gertrude threw Kapper away. I heard the two flopping thuds of him hitting the floor. Some guy was down on his knees close to me. His lips moved. I don't know if he could remember his prayers. Somebody else was vomiting, hard. I wanted to, but my stomach felt frozen.

The cold green fire had a shape inside it. I couldn't make it out clearly, except that it looked horribly human. It put out four thin green filaments. Don't ask me if they were physical things like tentacles, or just beams of light, or maybe thought. I don't know. Whatever they were, they worked.

They connected with the four black, snaky heads of the female *cansins*. I felt the shock of them connecting with my own nerves. And it was like something had welded those four brutes together into one.

They had been four. Separate, with hard outlines. Now they were one. One

single interlocking entity. I guess it was just my being so scared and sick, but I thought I saw their outlines blur a little.

Gow spoke suddenly. His voice was pretty loud, and calm.

"That was it," he said, as though it was the only thing in the world that mattered. "They ain't complete by themselves. Like the *surats* back home on Mercury. They got a community brain. No wonder Gertrude was lonesome."

His voice broke the spell. Somebody screamed, and everybody started to move at once, clawing in blind panic for the openings. And we all knew, then, what we were afraid of.

We were afraid of the little thing in the black box, the thing in a cloak of fire that had risen from the ruins of Kapper's body, and the power that lived in it.

I suppose we thought we were going to fight it, all right. But outside, where we could breathe. Not in here, with the hugeness of the females smothering us, penned in with the last male *cansin* in creation.

I knew then why Kapper had broken, and why he hadn't told, in spite of the *slak*. The thing hadn't let him. And it had called to its kind, from the deep swamps and Buckhalter Shannon's Imperial Circus.

THE deep indigo night of Venus had settled down, in the smell of mud and jungle and the hot rain. Lights flared crazily here and there out of open doorways. People were yelling, the tight, animal mob-yell of fear.

There was no place to run in Nahru. The jungle held it. The thick green jungle built on quicksand and crawling with death. Behind us the four *cansins* raised a wild whistling screech.

It was answered, out of the hot night between the little shacks of Nahru. Brute voices, singing their hate. Suddenly I remembered what Gow had said. "*She busted a lot of cages. . .*"

God knew what was loose in that town.

Bucky Shannon spoke beside me. We were still running, slipping and floundering in the mud, making toward the ship from sheer instinct. He gasped,

"We got to get those babies rounded up. Gow! Gow, you hear me? We got to get 'em back!"

Gow's voice came sullenly. "I hear you, boss." We slowed down. It was suddenly important to hear what more Gow had to say.

"Don't you get it?" he asked slowly. "Gertrude let 'em out. She wanted 'em—to help her. They know it. They ain't going back."

Somewhere behind us a plastic shack cracked open like an eggshell. Human cries were drowned in a whistling screech. Off to the right the Mercurian cave-cat began to laugh like a crazy woman.

Slow, patient, animal hate, walled around them, waiting. The feel and smell of hate in the brute tank. I could feel and smell it now, in Nahru, only it wasn't patient and waiting any more.

The time it had waited for was here. Gertrude had set it free.

Shannon said, very softly, "Mother o' God, what are we going to do?"

"Get back to the ship. Get back and get out of here!"

I jumped. It was Melak's voice, sounding hard and ugly. Light spilling out of a sagging door made a faint silhouette of him in the rain. He held a blaster in his hand.

Shannon snarled, "Take off with half my gang stranded here? You go to hell!"

Rockets blasted suddenly out on the landing field. Somebody had made it to Beamish's yacht and gone. The runabout followed it. The circus ship was still there, and the only one in Nahru.

I said, "We can't go. Not with a couple hundred credits' worth of animals running loose in the town."

"Get on to the ship," said Melak. "Cripes, if I knew how to fly I'd leave you here! Now move!"

Shannon was almost crying. He started to rush Melak. I caught him and said, "Sure. Sure we'll move. All of us. Look behind you!"

"I was weaned on that one. Move!"
Well, it was his funeral.

IT was almost ours, too. Ganymedian puffballs move fast. They had come out from between two shacks, skimming over the mud on their long white cilia. There were three of them, rolled up in balls about the size of my head. They didn't make any noise.

They came up behind Melak. Two of the unrolled suddenly, whipping out into lean, fuzzy ropes about five feet long. They went around the Martian 'breed. The third one came straight at me.

Melak made a noise that wasn't human and went down. The puffballs tightened around him, pulsing a little with the pleasure of digestion. Gow was on the other side of Melak, too far away, and unarmed.

I jumped, and the mud tripped me. Shannon fell the other way. The puffball, strung out now like a fuzzy snake, paused a moment, not three inches from my face. I lay still on my belly, choking on my heart.

Shannon moved, and it whipped down across his legs.

He screamed. I could feel the poison from the thing eating into him. I got to my knees and he cursed me and raised something out of the mud. It was Melak's blaster. He fired, between his feet.

The puffball shrivelled to a little stinking wire and dropped away. Bucky said evenly, "That pays me off. Now it's all your party, Jig."

He fainted. His legs were already swelling. Gow bent over him.

"He's gotta have the croaker, quick."

"You take him to the ship, Gow. If you can get there."

"Me? I'm the zoo-man. I oughta..."

"Do I look like Superman, to carry that big lug?" I didn't know why it was so hard to talk. "Get him there. Then round up everybody left at the ship. Get guns and ropes and torches and come back, quick!"

He nodded and got Bucky across his shoulders. I gave him the blaster. Then I turned back. I knew where most of the circus gang would be—spread out among the bars.

It was a lot darker, because now all the doors were closed, except two or three where the people hadn't lived to close them. It was quieter, too, because there's a limit to the noise a human throat can make. There was just the hot rain, and the soft jungle undertone of things padding and slithering in the mud, hunting.

Up the street somewhere the *cansins* screamed, and another shack split open. Instantly the brute clamor went up from the dark alleys, answering. Animal legions from five different planets, led by a tiny

creature in a cloak of green fire. And man was the common enemy.

A pair of Martian sand-tigers shot out into the street ahead of me. They were frolicking like kittens, playing with something dark and tattered. Then they saw me and dropped it, and came sliding on their bellies, their six powerful legs sucking in the mud.

There was no place to go. I don't remember being particularly scared, but that wasn't because I was brave. It was sheer exhaustion. A guy can only take so much. Now I was just walking around, seeing and hearing, but not feeling anything inside. Like a guy that's coked to the ears, or punchy from a beating.

I picked up a double handful of mud and slung it in their snarling pussies, and threw my head back and yelled.

"Ha-a-y *Rube!*"

A door at my left opened three inches, daggering the rain with yellow light. A voice said,

"For gossakes get in here!"

I picked up another handful of mud. The Martian cats were pawing the last load out of their eyes. I gave them more to play with. I guess they weren't very hungry, just then. I said,

"I'm going to get the *cansins*."

Just like that. I told you I was out on my feet. Clean nuts. The guy in the doorway thought so too.

"Will you come in before you're too dead?"

"And wait around for those big apes to crack the house open over my head? The hell with that." More mud splashed in the cats' faces. They were beginning to get sore. "The rest of the critters are just following the *cansins*. Sort of a mopping-up brigade. Stop the *cansins*, and we can round up the others easy."

"Oh, sure," said the man. "Any time before breakfast. Are you coming, pal, or do I shut this door again?"

I don't know how it would have turned out. Probably I'd have wound up inside the cats. But one of 'em let out a shrill, nasty wail, the kind they give the trainer when they're challenging him to a finish fight, and somebody came shouldering out past the man in the doorway.

The door swung wide, so that there was plenty of light. The six-inch fangs on the

Martian kitties were a beautiful, shining white. The newcomer said something to the cats in a level undertone and came to me.

It was Jarin, the Titan who works the cats. He's about half my height, metallic green in color, and faster on his feet than a rummy grabbing the first drink. He looks like a walking barrel when he's folded up, and like nothing on earth when he isn't.

He was unfolded then. He went up to the cats, light and dainty in the mud. They were crouching uneasily, coughing and snarling, wanting to rush him and not quite daring to.

The male sprang.

IV

ALL I could see was a green blur in the rain. I heard the crisp, wicked smacks of Jarin's tentacles on the tiger. It flopped over in mid-air, buried its face in the mud and came up yowling, like your Aunt Minnie's cat when you stepped on its tail.

It went away from there, fast, with its mate right behind it.

Jarin chuckled softly. "About the *cansins*," he hissed. "You had an idea?"

Somewhere, quite close to us, there was the familiar sound of a plastic shack going to pieces. I remembered hearing blasters rip occasionally. But only Melak's hoods were armed with anything heavy enough to do any good, and I guessed most of them had beat it to Beamish's yacht. A *cansin* has a hell of a tough hide, and their vitality is something you wouldn't believe if you hadn't seen it.

The familiar whistling screech went up, and the babel of human screams and the brute chorus from the rainy alleys. I think, right then, I began to get scared. The fear began to seep through my dopey calm, like pain in a new wound.

I shuddered and said, "No. No ideas."

There was a soft step in the mud behind me. I spun around, sweating. Ahra the Nahali woman stood there, red-eyed and laughing.

"You are frightened," she whispered.

I didn't deny it.

"I can help you stop the *cansins*." Her eyes glittered like wet rubies, and her teeth were white and sharp. "It may not work, and you may die. Will you try it?"

She was daring me. She was hardly more human than the brutes themselves, and she belonged with the rain and the hot indigo night.

I said, "You don't want to help, Ahra. You want us to die."

I could see the pale skin throbbing under her bony jaw. She laughed, soft alien laughter that made my back hair stir and prickle.

"You humans," she whispered. "Trampling and spoiling. The middle swamps have suffered you, greedy after oil and plumes and *ti*. But you we can fight."

She jerked her round, glistening head toward the sound of destruction. "The death from the deep swamps, no. You deserve to die, you humans. You went meddling with something too big even for your pride. But because the *cansins* killed my mate and our first young. . . ."

She hunched up. I thought she was going to flop on her belly like a cayman in the mud. Her teeth gleamed, sharp and savage.

"Legend says the *cansins* were once the wisest race on Venus. They were worshipped as gods by the little pre-human creatures of the swamp edges. They were going to be the reasoning lords of a planet.

"But nature made a mistake. Perhaps some mutation that couldn't be stopped. I don't know. Anyway, the females grew until their one thought was to find enough food. The males tried to balance this. Most of their strength was in their minds, anyway. But they couldn't.

"The *cansins* took to eating their worshippers. At the same time the number of eggs they laid grew smaller and smaller. Finally the swamp-edgers drove them out, back into the deep swamps.

"They've been there ever since, going farther and farther on the path of evolution, dwindling in numbers, always hungry, and hating the humans who robbed them of their future. Even us they hate, because we go erect and have speech. The females are not independent. The male controls the community mind—they must have unity to exist at all.

"If you could control the male. . . ."

I thought of the little creature in the ball of green fire. I shivered, and the pit of my stomach pinched up. I said, "Yeah? How?"

She chuckled at me. "It may mean death. Will you risk it?"

I didn't have to. I could beat it back to the ship, maybe even rescue some of the gang, with Jarin's help. Then I thought about Bucky and the way he cried down my neck that night in the tank and what would happen to us if we didn't get the animals rounded up. I thought—oh, hell, why does a guy ever do anything? I don't know. Maybe I thought I'd never get across the field to the ship anyhow.

I said, "Spill it, you she-snake. What do I do?"

"Get Quern," she said, and went off through the hot rain, back into the plastic shack. The door slammed shut. Jarin and I were alone in the dark.

I said, "Will you help me?"

"Of course."

I looked down the street toward the landing field. I felt tired, suddenly. Gone in the knees and weak, and sick to vomiting with fear.

"Here comes Gow," I said. "He's got seven or eight guys with guns. Just keep the critters off us until we get through with the *cansins*, and try not to kill any more than you can help."

Good old Jig, thinking about money even then. Gow came up. We talked a minute, just the things that had to be said, and then I asked,

"Anybody have an idea where Quern might be?"

"Yeah," said Gow slowly. "He was in the ginmill next to the one we was in. Drunk. I heard him singin' when I went by. I think the big apes wrecked it."

WE started off up the muddy street, more as though we'd been wound up to go somewhere and couldn't stop than like men with a purpose. The *cansins* were close. Awful close. You could hear them sucking and slopping in the muck. The rain fell straight down, almost solid, and the air was thick and hot.

We did a lot of shouting. Some men came out of the shacks to join us, but nobody had seen Quern since the trouble started. We had trouble with the animals in the streets. The vapor snakes got one man, and an Ionian *hru* poisoned one guy so bad he died the next day. We had to

kill a couple of big babies that wouldn't scare off.

And we found the ginmill. Gow was right. It was wrecked, and there were things scattered around amongst the splinters. I was glad it was dark.

"Well," I said, "that's that. We'll just have to do what we can with the blasters." It wouldn't be much. We didn't carry any heavy artillery, and a *cansin* is awfully hard to stop.

"Any you guys wanta scram, do it now. The rest of you come on."

I took a step. Something squirmed under my foot, squeaked, and began to curse in a voice like a katydid's.

"My God," I said. "It's Quern."

I picked him up. His rubbery little body was slick with mud. He spat and hic-coughed, and snarled,

"Of course it's Quern. Fine thing, leaving me in the mud like that. I might ha' drowned." He started cursing again in Low Martian, which is his native tongue. He's a Diran from the sea-bottom pits of Shun.

Somebody laughed. It sounded hysterical. "The little lush! He don't even know what's happened!"

And he didn't. The *cansins* hadn't even seen him. He'd just been tromped into the mud and left there, unharmed.

Gow caught his breath suddenly, and somebody whimpered. I looked up. I couldn't see much, in the rain and the indigo dark, but I didn't have to see. I knew what was coming.

A little vicious splotch of living green against the darkness, and underneath it four huge shadows, trampling knee-deep in mud, making toward a plastic hut filled with human beings.

I said softly, "Quern, I never thought you were such a hell of a wonderful hypnotist."

He twinged in my hands. His anger almost burned me. He started to speak, but I stopped him.

"Here's your chance to prove it, chum. See that little green light floating there? Well, go to it, Quern. And it had better be good, or it's curtains—for Nahru and all of us."

I walked over toward the *cansins*, holding Quern in my hands.

THE brutes must have sensed us. They stopped and wheeled around. Quern shivered. He was beginning to understand things. He snarled,

"How do you expect me to do my act? No platform—nothing! You're crazy, jig! Let's get out of here."

I shook him. "Put that baby to sleep. Make him and his harem go out of town, north. There's the quicksand there. Go on, damn you!"

He cursed me. You could smell the fear rising hot from us all. I heard feet running behind me, and then more, going away. Quern said,

"All right, you crazy fool. Raise me up. Hold your hands flat."

I made a platform out of my palms. And the *cansins* started our way.

Gow whispered, "Don't shoot. Don't anybody shoot." I don't think he knew then, that there wasn't anybody left to shoot but himself and Jarin.

The *cansins* were huge and solid, behemoths carved from the night. They towered over us, and the green light pulsed. My jaw hung open and I couldn't breathe, and I'd have run only my joints were all water.

Quern went into his act.

He began to show color. Out of nothing his body started to glow, from inside. You could see the round blurred shape of him, and the phosphorescence of his guts, showing through. First red, savage as a punch in the face, and then all the rest of the spectrum, sometimes one color, sometimes a swirl of them.

His body changed shape. I could feel the queer rubbery movement of it on my hands. I remembered the rubes I'd seen standing around Quern's platform, their eyes drawn half out of their heads by the shifting lines and colors. It worked with them. But not here.

The *cansins* came on. The green light flared a little brighter, and that was all. Habit and control were so strong that not even the females paid much attention to Quern. I could see the rain smoking off their huge black shoulders. They were right on top of us.

Quern gasped, "I can't do it!" His glow deadened. I shook him. I yelled,

"I knew you were a phony! You two-

bit yentzer! Jarin, slow 'em down, can't you?"

Quern began to shimmer again. Jarin faded in, hardly visible in the darkness. I heard his tentacles whiplashing across hard flesh.

One of the *cansins* screamed. The green light did a sharp dip and swirl. And I yelled,

"Gow! Speak to Gertrude!"

The terrifying forward march slowed a little. Quern was churning colors out of his guts as though his life depended on it—which it did. Gow stepped forward a little.

"Gertrude," he said. "Gertrude, you ugly, slab-sided, left-handed—"

He cursed her, affectionately. I never heard anything like his voice. I wanted to cry. In Quern's faint hypnotic glow I saw the green eyes of the nearest female watching, looking wide and queer.

The male was angry, now. Angry and scared. You could tell by the vicious brightness of him. We decided afterward that his light was the same kind a glow-worm carries around, only stronger. He was fighting. Fighting to hold those four minds against the attraction of Quern's shifting glow.

He'd have done it, too, if it hadn't been for Gow. Gow, standing in the hot rain and cursing Gertrude with tears in his voice.

Gertrude screamed. Suddenly, for no reason, a strange uncertain cry. She moved. A sort of shudder ran through the other three. It was a little like a wall cracking. The male burned savagely.

The females were watching Quern, now. Gertrude had made the breach. Now the community mind was fastened on the hyp-

notic little Martian. I could see their green eyes, wide and glassy, their snaky heads nodding a little, trying to follow the flowing outlines.

The male began to dim. He shivered, and lurched a couple of times, still trying to fight. Gow's voice went on, hoarsely, and Gertrude whimpered. The male floated a little closer. I could see, suddenly, what kept him up. Wings, like a hummingbird's, blurred with motion.

They slowed, and the green light dimmed. He began to bob a little in the hot rain, watching Quern.

Quern shivered. "They're under," he sighed. "They're under."

"Send them out. North, to the quicksands." My arms and shoulders ached and I was swaying on my feet. I hardly heard Quern's thin, dreamy voice. I did hear the slow, obedient noise of their great feet slogging away, the last male *cansin* a dull green mote above them.

And I heard Gow crying.

WE got the last of the animals back by noon of the next day. We did what we could for Nahru. Thank God our own beasts hadn't done much damage. We left a lot of Beamish's credits to help out, and took the old tub off away from there.

Bucky Shannon recovered nicely. I'm still herding his Imperial Washout around the Triangle. We're not doing so hot without Gertrude, but what the hell—we're used to the sewage lock.

And if anyone has a *cansin* he wants to sell. . . . Thanks, chum, but we're not in the market. Now, or ever.

I sometimes wonder if there are any more of them in the deep swamps, waiting for their mate to come back.



A Fiction House Magazine



STRANGER FROM SPACE

By HANNES BOK

She prayed that a God would come from the skies and carry her away to bright adventures. But when he came in a metal globe, she knew only disappointment—for his godliness was oddly strange!

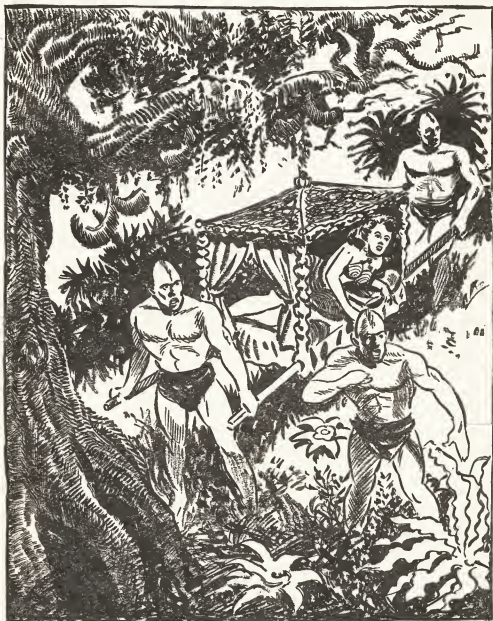


Illustration by Saaf

IT was twilight on Venus—the rusty red that the eyes notice when their closed lids are raised to light. Against the glow, fantastically twisted trees spread

claws of spiky leaves, and a group of clay huts thrust up sharp edges of shadow, like the abandoned toy blocks of a gigantic child. There was no sign of clear sky and

stars—the heavens were roofed by a perpetual ceiling of dust-clouds.

A light glimmered in one of the huts. Feminine voices rippled across the clearing and into the jungle. There was laughter, then someone's faint and wistful sigh. One of the voices mourned, in the twittering Venusian speech, "How I envy you, Koroby! I wish I were being married to-night, like you!"

Koroby stared defiantly at the laughing faces of her bridesmaids. She shrugged hopelessly. "I don't care," she said slowly. "It will be nice to have Yasak for a husband—yes. And perhaps I do love him. I don't know." She tightened her lips as she reflected on it.

She left them, moving gracefully to the door. Venus-girls were generally of truly elfin proportions, so delicately slim that they seemed incapable of the slightest exertion. But Koroby's body was—compared to her friends—voluptuous.

She rested against the door-frame, watching the red of the afterglow deepen to purple. "I want romance," she said, so softly that the girls had to strain forward to hear her. "I wish that there were other worlds than this—and that someone would drop out of the skies and claim me . . . and take me away from here, away from all this—this monotony!"

She turned back to her friends, went to them, one of her hands, patting the head of the kneeling one. She eyed herself in the mirror.

"Well—heigh-ho! There don't seem to be any other worlds, and nobody is going to steal me away from Yasak, so I might as well get on with my preparations. The men with the litter will be here soon to carry me to the Stone City."

She ran slim hands down her sides, smoothing the blue sarong; she fondled her dark braids. "Trossa, how about some flowers at my ears—or do you think that it would look a little too much—?" Her eyes sought the mirror, and her lips parted in an irreprehensible smile. She trilled softly to herself, "Yes, I am beautiful tonight—the loveliest woman Yasak will ever see!" And then, regretfully, sullenly, "But oh, if only *He* would come . . . the man of my dreams!"

There was a rap at the doorway; they turned. One of the litter-bearers loomed

darker than the gloomy sky. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Koroby twirled before the mirror, criticizing her appearance. "Yes, ready," she said.

"Ready!" the girls cried. Then there was a little silence.

"Shall we go now?" Koroby asked, and the litter-carrier nodded. Koroby kissed the girls, one after another. "Here, Shonka—you can have this bracelet you've always liked. And this is for you, Lolla. And here, Trossa—and you, Shia. Goodbye, darlings, goodbye—come and see me whenever you can!"

"Goodbye, Koroby!"

"Goodbye! Goodbye!" They crowded around her, embracing, babbling farewells, shreds of advice. Trossa began to cry. Finally Koroby broke away from them, went to the door. She took a last look at the interior of the little hut, dim in the lamplight—at the hard bed of laced *gnau*-hide strips, the crude but beautifully-carved charts and chests. Then she turned and stepped out into the night.

"This way," the litter-carrier announced, touching the girl's arm. They stumbled over the rutted clearing toward the twinkling sparks that were the lights of the other litter-bearers, colored sparks as befitted a wedding-conveyance. The winking lights were enclosed in shells of colored glass for another reason—the danger of their firing the papery jungle verdure.

IT was not a new litter, built especially for the occasion—Yasak was too practical a man to sanction any kind of waste. It was the same old litter that Koroby had been watching come and go ever since she was a little girl, a canopied framework of gaudily-painted carvings. She had wondered, watching it pass, whether its cushioned floor was soft, and now, as she stepped into the litter, she patted the padding experimentally. Yes, it was soft . . . And fragrant, too—a shade too fragrant. It smelled stale, hinting of other occupants, other brides being borne to other weddings . . .

Garlands of flowers occupied a good deal of space in it. Settled among them, she felt like a bird in a strange nest. She leaned back among them; they rustled dryly. Too bad—it had been such a dry year—

"You're comfortable?" the litter bearer asked. Koroby nodded, and the litter was lifted, was carried along the path.

The procession filed into the jungle, into a tunnel of arched branches, of elephant-eared leaves. Above the monotonous music came the hiss of the torches, the occasional startled cry of a wakened bird. The glow of the flames, in the dusty air, hung around the party, sharply defined, like a cloak of light. At times a breeze would shake the ceiling of foliage, producing the sound of rolling surf.

Koroby fingered the flowers around her throat, her eyes rapt on the passing trees. Her lips moved in the barest murmur: "If only—I" and again, "Oh, if only—I" But the music trickled on, and nothing happened; the litter seemed to float along—none of the bearers even stumbled.

They came to a cleared space of waist-high grass. It was like a canyon steeply walled by cliffs of verdure. The litter jerked as it glided along, and Koroby heard one of the bearers exclaim gruffly, "Listen!" Then the litter resumed its dream-like floating on the backs of the men.

"What was it?" another bearer asked.

"Thought I heard something," the other replied. "Shrill and high—like something screaming—"

Koroby peered out. "A *gnau*?" she asked.

"I don't know," the bearer volunteered.

Koroby lifted a hand, "Stop the litter," she said.

THE conveyance halted. Koroby leaning out, the men peering around them, they listened. One of the bearers shouted at the musicians; the music ceased. There was nothing to be heard except the whisper of the breeze in the grass.

Then the girl heard it—a shrill, distant whine, dying away, then growing louder—and louder—it seemed to be approaching—from the sky—

All the faces were lifted up now, worriedly. The whine grew louder—Koroby's hands clenched nervously on the wreaths at her throat—

Then, far ahead, a series of bright flashes, like the lighting of the dust-storms, but brilliantly green. A silence, then staccato reports, certainly not thunder—unlike any sound that Koroby had ever heard.

There was a babble of voices as the musicians crowded together, asking what had it been, and where—just exactly—could one suppose it had happened, that thunder—was it going to storm!

They waited, but nothing further happened—there were no more stabs of green light nor detonations. The bearers stooped to lift the litter's poles to their shoulders. "Shall we go on?" one of them asked Koroby.

She waved a hand. "Yes, go on."

The litter resumed its gentle swaying, but the music did not start again. Then, from the direction of the light-flashes, a glow appeared, shining steadily, green as the flashes had been. Noticing it, Koroby frowned. Then the path bent, and the glow swung to one side.

Suddenly Koroby reached out, tapped the shoulder of the closet bearer. "Go toward the light."

His face swung up to hers. "But—there's no path that way—"

"I don't care," she said. "Take me there." Her order had reached the others' ears, and they slowed their pace.

"Lady—believe me—it's impossible. There's nothing but matted jungle in that direction—we'd have to hack our way as we go along. And who knows how far away that light is? Besides, you're on your way to be married."

"Take me to that light!" she persisted.

They set the litter down. "We can't do that," one man said to another.

Koroby stepped out to the path, straightened up, her eyes on the glow. "You'd better," she said ominously. "Otherwise, I'll make a complaint to Yasak—"

The men eyed each other, mentally shrugging. "Well—" one yielded.

The girl whirled impatiently on the others. "Hurry!" she cried. "If you won't take me, I'll go by myself. I must get to that fire, whatever it is!" She put a hand to her heart. "I must! I must!" Then she faced the green glare again, smiling to herself.

"You can't do that!" a carrier cried.

"Well, then, you take me," she said over her shoulder.

Grumbling, they bent to the conveyance's poles, and Koroby lithely slipped to the cushions. They turned off the path, plodded through the deep grass toward the

light. The litter lurched violently as their feet caught in the tangled grass, and clouds of fine dust arose from the disturbed blades.

BY the time they reached the source of the light, they were quite demoralized. The musicians had not accompanied them, preferring to carry the message to Yasak in the Stone City that his prospective bride had gone off on a mad journey. The bearers were powdered grey with dust, striped with blood where the dry grass-stems had cut them. They were exhausted and panting. Koroby was walking beside them, for they had abandoned the litter finally. Her blue drapery was ripped and rumpled; her carefully-arranged braids had fallen loose; dust on her face had hid its youthful color, aging her.

The expedition emerged from the jungle on a sandy stretch of barren land. A thousand feet away a gigantic metal object lay on the sand, crumpled as though it had dropped from a great distance. It had been globular before the crash, and was pierced with holes like windows. What could it possibly be? A house? But whoever heard of a metal house? Why, who could forge such a thing! Yasak's house in the City had iron doors, and they were considered one of the most wonderful things of the age. It would take a giant to make such a ponderous thing as this.

A house, fallen from the sky? The green lights poured out of its crumpled part, and a strange bubbling and hissing filled the air.

Koroby stopped short, clasping her hands and involuntarily uttering a squeal of joyful excitement, for between her and the blaze, his eyes on the destruction, stood a man . . .

He was very tall, and his shoulders were very wide. Oh, but he looked like a man, and stood like one—even though his hands were folded behind his back and he was probably dejected. A man in a house from the sky—

Koroby hastily grasped a corner of her gown, moistened it with saliva, and scrubbed her face. She rearranged her hair, and stepped forward.

"Don't go there—it's magic—he'll cast a spell!" one of the bearers whispered urgently, reaching after her, but Koroby pushed him away. The litter-carriers

watched the girl go, unconsciously huddling together as if feeling the need for combined strength. They withdrew into the jungle's shadows, and waited there anxiously, ready at any moment to run away.

But Koroby, with supreme confidence, walked toward the stranger, her lovely body graceful as a cat's, her face radiant. The man did not hear her. She halted behind him, waited silent, expectant, excited—but he did not turn. The green fire sputtered upward. At last the girl stepped to the man's side and gently touched him again. He turned, and her heart faltered: she swayed with bliss.

He was probably a god. Not even handsome Yasak looked like this. Here was a face so finely-chiseled, so perfectly proportioned, that it was almost frightening, unhuman, mechanical. It was unlined and without expression, somehow unreal. Mysterious, compelling.

He was clothed very peculiarly. A wonderfully-made metallic garment enclosed his whole body—legs and all, unlike the Venus-men's tunics. Even his feet were covered. Perhaps it was armor—though the Venus-men usually wore only breast-plate and greaves. And a helmet hid all of the man's head except his face. Around his waist was a belt with many incomprehensible objects dangling from it. If he was so well armored, why was he not carrying a sword—a dagger at least! Of what use were those things on his belt—for instance, that notched L-shaped thing? It would not even make a decent club!

The stranger did not speak, merely gazed deeply into Koroby's eyes. And she, returning the gaze, wondered if he was peering into her very soul. The words of a folk-ballad came to her:

"—He'll smile and touch my cheek,
And maybe more;
And though we'll neither speak,
We'll know the score—"

SUDDENLY he put his hands to her cheeks and bent close to her, his eyes peering into hers as though he were searching for something he had lost in them. She spoke her thought: "What are you doing? You seem to be reading my mind!"

Without removing hands, he nodded.

"Reading—mind." He stared long into her eyes. His dispassionate, too-perfect face began to frighten her. She slipped back from him, her hand clutching her throat.

He straightened up and spoke—haltingly at first, then with growing assurance. "Don't be afraid. I mean you no harm." She trembled. It was such a wonderful voice—it was as she had always dreamed it! But she had never really believed in the dream . . .

He was looking at the wrecked globe of metal. "So there are people on Venus!" he said slowly.

Koroby watched him, forgot her fear, and went eagerly to him, took his arm. "Who are you?" she asked. "Tell me your name!"

He turned his mask of a face to her. "My name? I have none," he said.

"No name? But who are you? Where are you from? And what is that?" She pointed at the metal globe.

"The vehicle by which I came here from a land beyond the sky," he said. She had no concept of stars or space, and he could not fully explain. "From a world known as Terra."

She was silent a moment, stunned. So there was another world! Then she asked, "Is it far? Have you come to take me there?"

Here the similarity between her dream and actual experience ended. What was he thinking as he eyed her for a long moment? She had no way of guessing. He said, "No, I am not going to take you back there." Her mouth gaped in surprise, and he continued, "As for the distance to Terra—it is incredibly far away."

The glare was beginning to die, the green flames' hissing fading to a whisper. They watched the melting globe sag on the sand. Then Koroby said, "But if it is so far away, how could you speak my language? There are some tribes beyond the jungle whose language is unlike ours—"

"I read your mind," he explained indifferently. "I have a remarkable memory."

"Remarkable indeed!" she mocked. "No one here could do that."

"But my race is infinitely superior to yours," he said blandly. "You little people—ah—" He gestured airily.

Her lips tightened and her eyes narrowed. "And I?"

His voice sounded almost surprised. "What about you?"

"You see nothing about me worthy of your respect? Are you infinitely superior to me—*me?*"

He looked her up and down. "Of course!"

Her eyes jerked wide open and she took a deep breath. "And just who do you think you are? A god?"

He shook his head. "No. Just better informed, for one thing. And—"

Koroby cut him short. "What's your name?"

"I have none."

"What do you mean, you have none?"

He seemed just a trifle bored. "We gave up names long ago on my world. We are concerned with more weighty things than our own selves. But I have a personal problem now," he said, making a peculiar sound that was not quite a sigh. "Here I am stranded on Venus, my ship utterly wrecked, and I'm due at the Reiszek Convention in two weeks. You"—he gripped Koroby's shoulder, and his strength made her wince—"tell me, where is the nearest city? I must communicate with my people at once."

She pointed. "The Stone City's that way."

"Good," he said. "Let's go there."

They took another glance at the metal globe and the green fire, which by now had died to a fitful glimmer. Then the stranger and the girl started toward the jungle, where the litter-bearers awaited them.

AS the party was struggling through the prairie's tall grass, the man said to Koroby, "I realize from the pictures in your mind that there is no means in your city of communicating directly with my people. But it seems that there are materials which I can utilize in building a signal—"

He was walking along, head erect, apparently quite at ease, while the litter bearers and Koroby could barely drag themselves with him. The girl's garment was a tattered ruin: Her skin was gritty with dust, and she was bleeding from many scratches. She tripped over tangled roots and exclaimed in pain. Then the man took

one of the strange implements from his belt, pressed a knob on it, and light appeared as if by magic! He handed the stick to Koroby, but she was afraid to touch it. This was a strange light that gave no heat, nor flickered in the breeze. Finally she accepted it from him, but carried it gingerly at arm's length.

She refused to believe that he had no name, and so he named himself. "Call me Robert. It is an ancient name on Terra."

"Robert," she said, and, "Robert."

But at last she could go no farther. She had forced herself along because she wanted to impress this indifferent man that she was not as inferior as he might think—but now she could not go on. With a little cry almost of relief, she sank to the ground and lay semi-conscious, so weary that the very pain of it seemed on the point of pleasure.

Robert dipped down, scooped her up, and carried her.

Lights glimmered ahead; shouts reached them. It was a searching party, Yasak in it. The litter-carriers who could still speak blurted out what had happened. "A green light—loud sounds—fire—this man there—" and then dropped into sleep.

"Someone carry these men," Yasak ordered. To Robert he said, "We're not very far from the path to the City now. Shall I carry the girl?"

"It makes no difference," Robert said.

"You will stay with me while you are in the City, of course," Yasak said, as they walked. He eyed this handsome stranger speculatively, and then turned to shout an necessary order. "You, there, keep in line!" He glanced at Robert furtively to see if this had impressed him at all.

IT was day. Koroby sat up in bed and scanned her surroundings. She was in Yasak's house. The bed was very soft, the coverlets of the finest weave. The furniture was elegantly carved and painted; there were even paintings on the walls.

A woman came to the bed. She was stocky and wore drab grey: the blue circles tattooed on her cheeks proclaimed her a slave. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"Fairly well. How long have I been ill?" Koroby asked, sweetly weak.

"You haven't been ill. They brought you in last night."

"Oh," Koroby said disappointedly, and sat upright. "I feel as if I'd been lying here for weeks. Where's Yasak? Where's the strange man in armor?"

"Yasak's out somewhere. The stranger man is in the room at the end of the hall."

"Fetch me something to wear—that's good enough," the girl accepted the mantle offered by the slave. "Quick, some water—I must wash."

In a few minutes she was lightly running down the hall; she knocked on the door of Robert's room. "May I come in?"

He did not answer. She waited a little and went in. He was seated on one of the carved chairs, fussing over some scraps of metal on the table. He did not look up.

"Thank you for carrying me, Robert."

He did not reply. "Robert—I dreamed of you last night. I dreamed you built another round house and that we both flew away in it. Yasak had to stay behind, and he was furious. Robert! Aren't you listening?"

"I hear you."

"Don't you think it was an exciting dream?" He shook his head. "But why? Robert"—she laid longing hands on his shoulders—"can't you see that I'm in love with you?" He shrugged. "I believe you don't know what love is!"

"I had a faint idea of it when I looked into your mind," he said. "I'm afraid I haven't any use for it. Where I come from, there is no love, and there shouldn't be here, either. It's a waste of time."

"Robert—I'm mad about you! I've dreamed of your coming—all my life! Don't be so cruel—so cold to me! You mock me, say that I'm nothing, that I'm not worthy of you—"

She stepped back from him, clenching her hands. "Oh, I hate you—hate you! You don't care the least bit about me—and I've shamed myself in front of you—I, supposed to be Yasak's wife by now!" She began to cry, hid her face in suddenly lax fingers. She looked up fiercely. "I could kill you!" Robert stood immobile, no trace of feeling marring the perfection of his face. "I could kill you, and I will kill you!" she sprang at him.

"You'll hurt yourself," he admonished kindly, and after she had pummeled his chest, bruising her fingers on his armor, she turned away.

"And now if you're through playing your incomprehensible little scene," Robert said, "I hope you will excuse me. I regret that I have no emotions—I was never allowed them. But it is an esthetic regret . . . I must go back to my wrecked ship now and arrange the signals there." He did not wait for her leave, but strode out of the room.

Koroby huddled on a chair, sobbing. Then she dried her eyes on the backs of her hands. She went to the narrow slits that served as windows and unfastened the translucent shutter of one. Down in the City street, Robert was walking away. Her eyes hardened, and her fingers spread into ugly claws. Without bothering to pull the shutter in place she hurried out of the room, ran eagerly down the hall. She stopped at the armor-rack at the main hall on her way outside, and snatched up a *siatcha*—a firestone. Then she slipped outside and down the street.

THE City's wall was not far behind. Robert was visible in the distance, striding toward his sky-ship, a widening cloud of dust rising behind him like the spreading wake of a boat. Koroby stood on tip-toe, waving and calling after him, "Robert! Robert! Come back!" but he did not seem to hear.

She watched him a little longer. Then she deliberately stooped and drew the firestone out of its sheath. She touched it to a blade of the tall grass. A little orange flame licked up, slowly quested along the blade, down to the ground and up another stem. It slipped over to another stem, and another, growing larger, hotter—Koroby stepped back from the writhing fire, her hand protectively over her face.

The flames crackled at first—like the crumpling of thin paper. Then, as they widened and began climbing hand over hand up an invisible ladder, they roared. Koroby was running back toward the City now, away from the heat. The fire spread in a long line over the prairie. Above its roar came shouts from the City. The flames rose in a monstrous twisting pillar,

brighter than even the dust-pallid sky, lighting the buildings and the prairie. The heat was dreadful.

Koroby reached the City wall, panted through the gate into a shrieking crowd. Someone grasped her roughly—she was too breathless to do more than gasp for air—and shook her violently. "You fool, you utter fool! What did you think you were doing?" Others clamored around her, reaching for her. Then she heard Yasak's voice. Face stern, he pushed through the crowd, pressed her to him. "Let her alone— Let her alone, I say!"

They watched the conflagration, Yasak and Koroby, from a higher part of the wall than where the others were gathered. They could glimpse Robert now and then. He was running, trying to outrace the flames. Then they swept around him, circling him—his arms flailed frantically.

THE fire had passed over the horizon. The air was blue with smoke, difficult to breathe, and ashes were drifting lightly down like dove-colored snow. Yasak, watery eyed, a cloth pressed to his nose, was walking with several others over the smoking earth and still warm ashes up to his knees. In one hand he held a stick. He stopped and pointed. "He fell about here," he said, and began to probe the ashes with the stick.

He struck something. "Here he is!" he cried. The others hurried to the spot and scooped ashes away, dog-fashion, until Robert's remains were laid clear. There were exclamations of amazement and perplexity from the people.

It was a metal skeleton, and the fragments of complicated machinery, caked with soot.

"He wasn't human at all!" Yasak marvelled. "He was some kind of a toy made to look like a man—that's why he wore armor, and his face never changed expression—"

"Magic!" someone cried, and backed away.

"Magic!" the others repeated, and edged back . . . and that was the end of one of those robots which had been fashioned as servants for Terrestrial men, made in Man's likeness to appease Man's vanity, then conquered him.



The Meteor Makers

By PETER HAMILTON

A menace stalked the spaceways, a doom so terrible even the Space Guards fled its horror. And then, hurling his mocking challenge, came outlaw Jak Sullivan—risking his life that a dozen worlds might live.

“GREETINGS,” said Jak Sullivan and he stuck his hand across the bar. “My name’s Lon Bailey. I’m selling insurance. How’re you—”

“What’ll you have?” The bartender, an undersized Jovian who still towered a foot over the Earthman, put two webbed and talon-tipped hands on the bar and looked

him over coldly, eyes like frozen water. "Oh, a *texol*—with water." Jak added the latter hastily and contrived to smile foolishly. He hated his *texol* anything but straight, but he had to keep in character. "Will you join me?"

The Jovian shuffled off without a word. Somebody nearby laughed. And something inside Jak bristled.

Then he caught himself again. He glanced at the mirror over the bar and

tried to put some droop into those broad shoulders of his. Lon Bailey, the insurance agent, would not fight; he'd try to pass everything off as a joke. What Jak Sullivan would do was not important—not just now.

Jak looked beyond himself through the mirror over the bar at the room behind him, and let its noise into his ears.

He hadn't been misinformed. This was the toughest station on a little world full

Illustration by Paul



of tough stations—Lilith, moon of Jupiter. And this barroom was the toughest spot on it. He looked it over with the eyes of Jak Sullivan, eyes that had been places in the System—eyes that had seen plenty.

The place held an evil mixture. Most of it was Jovian, the big bird-men, beaked and horny, their voices cawing like crows. There was a fair sprinkling of the scaly, orange hides of the Martians—they of the underslung, shark-like jaws and the whistling speech. There were even some Venusians, hairy, pint-sized things adding their soft growls to the din. And, of course, there were Terrestrials, looking fine and clean-limbed amid this collection of monsters.

But Jak knew. Knock about the System the way he had and anyone would develop a sixth sense that would enable him to spot a good one from a bad one, no matter what body it hailed from. And of them all, the bad Terrestrials were the worst.

The bartender brought his drink. Jak started to toss it off and then remembered. He sipped it. Then he turned to his neighbor, a Martian.

"Greetings," he said, sticking out his hand. "My name's Bailey. Lon Bailey. Just dropped in here a couple of days ago. My line's insurance. Somebody told me no insurance man's been to Lilith for light-years. So I thought I'd—come around—and—"

He *had* to stop the silly chatter. The other had turned to study him with fish-like eyes.

"I don't want any insurance," he squeaked. "And I don't like your face, Earth-gur."

"Why, what's the matter?" Jak managed to stammer. "What did I say—I mean, what have you got against—"

The Martian was grinning contemptuously. "Know why no insurance man's been here? Last two or three to show up never left. We kept them here. Keep your beak closed, Earth-gur, or we'll take you out to join them—on the surface. They keep beautifully out there."

A nine-foot Jovian lounged between them.

"Now, now, that's no way to talk to a visitor to Lilith," he rasped. "We want to make him feel at home. My name's

Scradlo. I understand yours is Bailey. Shake." He stuck out his claw.

Anybody, Sullivan *or* Bailey, would hesitate to put a perfectly good hand there. But Sullivan made Bailey do it.

It wasn't torn off at the wrist. It was just held in a steely grip.

"You know," went on Scradlo, still gripping the hand, "I've never had insurance. I was just thinking about it the other day. Anything can happen to a man—and he ought to have protection."

"Yes, sir," said Lon Bailey, meekly.

"Now you come along; and I suddenly think it's a good chance to find out about it. Come on over here and let's talk."

Another claw fastened on the Sullivan biceps—of the same arm whose hand was imprisoned. And Jak found himself being impelled across the floor. As they went, the chattering uproar in the room dimmed noticeably.

THE Jovian pushed him through a door. Jak managed to stumble so that he could secretly feel the discharger nestling in the pocket of his space-suit. He turned around in time to see Scradlo spin the dial lock on the door.

"Lon Bailey, hey?" The Jovian stood over Jak, suddenly menacing. "We know all about Lon Bailey! Somebody said you might be dropping in on us. They said, if your name was Lon Bailey, Lilith was made of solid platinum."

Jak started backing away.

"So we looked you up. Were still looking you up when you dropped off that tramp ship a couple of days ago. Got the facts today. You're not Lon Bailey. You're—"

Jak made a play for his discharger, praying the other would be quick enough. He was. He whipped out his own discharger and leveled it while Jak was still fumbling at the grip of his.

"Take it easy," advised Scradlo. "You're on Lilith now, Sullivan. Jak Sullivan. Wanted from Mercury to Neptune. Wanted for just about everything, including murder."

"Now, listen," Jak forced himself to plead in a whining tone. "You can't call it murder if it's in self-defense. Remember the Code."

"The Code of Space!" sneered Scradlo.

"We don't go by that stupid Code here."

"All right," said Jak. "You've got me. What are you going to do? Turn me over to the Space Guards?"

Scradlo laughed outright. "Maybe. It all depends."

"Depends on what?"

"We can use a man like you." Scradlo smiled a thin cold smile. "A man who doesn't mind a little killing now and then."

"Who's *we*?" snapped Jak.

"You'll find out in plenty of time. If you stay out and try to pull whatever little odd jobs you came here for, we'll either shove you outside or we'll turn you over to the Space Guards. Join us," he snickered, "and see the System."

Jak put his eyes on the floor, as if trying to figure it all out. Then he raised his head. "All right," he said. "You and your outfit, whatever it is, hold all the cards. I'm in."

"Good!" The Jovian slammed him across the back and Jak reeled against the wall, fighting to keep his fists from flying out. He grinned sheepishly, instead.

Then he remembered. He was no longer playing Lon Bailey, the milk-and-water insurance agent. He was himself now. Jak Sullivan, tough one-man raider. He didn't have to take any more nonsense.

But it was too late to sock the Jovian. Scradlo was opening the door. Jak shrugged off the terrible wallop on the back and prepared himself for the next deal—the next deal in this game he was playing.

Six hours later, in the lurid dawn of Lilith's five-hour day, Jak found himself staring with ill-controlled excitement at a curious machine before him.

He and Scradlo were flying low in an old ship. Beside them, but at a distance, flew an older ship; it moved as Scradlo's talons moved over a remote control panel.

Pointing at that distant ship was this machine, an affair of twin tubes, its mechanism carefully sealed from view. And Jak's elated excitement raged against his control. If this machine was what he thought it was, he was at the end of his quest. Scradlo, eternally close-mouthed and evasive, had given him no satisfac-

tion. But now, he, Jak Sullivan, was going to operate this machine. And know for sure.

"Now!" squawked Scradlo.

Jak pressed a trembling thumb down on a button.

Nothing happened. At least not to the other ship.

"Terrible!" said Scradlo. "Remember, this has no sights like a ray projector. Just lay your eye along the groove between the tubes and try again."

Jerry squinted again and thumbed the button.

He had the ship lined up for fair this time. The machine made no sound.

BUT the distant ship before Jak's staring eyes suddenly *blurred*. Its outlines grew rough. Its ports and tubes vanished slowly as under a cloud. And it ceased to be recognizably an old rattletrap of a space-ship. It became an ovoïd lump curving slowly to earth, despite the Jovian's rapid manipulation of the controls, and crashed there.

"All right!" snapped Scradlo. "Release the button."

Jak came to and took his finger away. He took a deep breath and turned to face the Jovian.

"*The Meteor Makers*," he said. The Jovian said nothing, but put his claw on the discharger in the outside pocket of his space-suit.

"The Meteor Makers," said Jak again. "The biggest, toughest outfit in the System. The gang that has the Space Guards licked. And this," he waved toward the apparatus, "is what you have them licked with. And you want me to join you."

"We need men like you," said Scradlo.

"What makes me nervous," said Jak, "is that the Guards have just issued a Mobilization Call against you. That means that, according to the Code of Space, everybody in the System is now working with the Guards, helping them to get you."

The Jovian laughed. "It's about time you learned about this case—and what it can do. There's only one man alive who knows its secret. That man is our Leader, Falk."

"I know," said Jak, "I've heard about him."

"Falk makes these casers in his secret laboratory and delivers them to us. All we know, and all *you* need to know, is that the caser shoots a stream of positive and negative electrons which condense around the target. They turn into matter, or substance—and build a layer around the target. Just like a heavy frost. The ratio of positrons and negatrons is fixed in the projecting mechanism. All our casers are set for iron—like meteor iron."

"Which is why you're called the Meteor Makers," put in Jak. Scradlo ignored him and went on.

"The range of the caser seems to be unlimited. All we have to do is spot a Space Guard before he can get near enough to use his ray. We don't have to worry about his ray. But *he* has to worry about the caser."

"I get the picture now," said Jak. "You just drape a suit of iron over him—and that's that. By the time he blasts his way out of it—"

"If he can," interposed Scradlo.

"Why couldn't he?"

"We can put a *heavy* coat on him. When he tries to free his ray ports—first thing to do, of course—molten iron starts running into his projectors, jamming them up good. Then he stays put."

"He—he's a meteor," said Jak slowly.

"Sure. We *build* out the iron, making him nice and round. All that remains is for him to find an orbit." The Jovian chuckled like a crow cawing.

"That's a hell of a death," said Jak somberly.

Scradlo shrugged. "It's the only way to teach the Space Guards to keep their distance. They learned hard, but they learned. When we go out on a job, they're careful to stay out of sight. And that's why you've got nothing to worry about. The System is our oyster."

"Until somebody figures out how to stop the caser."

"Nobody's going to do that!" snapped Scradlo. "Leader Falk's the only one who knows anything about it."

"What kind of a bird is this Falk anyway? What does he look like?"

Scradlo laughed. "You'll find out. Plenty of time. Get back to the caser."

"I know," Jak complained, "but it seems to me I've got a right to know *some*

things before I join this outfit—even if it is the Meteor Makers."

"Yes, and if you ask too many questions," said Scradlo evenly, "you'll find yourself settling into an orbit—*outside*."

Jak frowned and turned to the caser.

JUST then the telecaster spoke. "Attention, Scradlo. Attention, Scradlo." Jak was puzzled by the character of the voice—vaguely Terrestrial and yet—

Scradlo cut in. "Scradlo speaking. Aboard Workshop."

"I know it's the Workshop," said the voice impatiently. "Idle down. I'm boarding. I want to see the new man."

Jak's heart leaped.

A small, sleek ship came alongside, expertly nosing its boarding lock against that of the Workshop. Seconds later a space-suited figure entered the cabin. Off came the helmet—and Jak gasped.

A girl! A young, pert face framed in tumbling auburn curls! A firm, sweet mouth, and gray eyes!

A toss of the head threw back those curls. The mouth remained firm. And the eyes were hard. They flickered with interest as they swept him from head to foot, taking in the Terrestrial Irish face and the broad Terrestrial shoulders. But they remained hard.

"Greetings, Thana," mumbled Scradlo, ducking his towering head. "This is him."

"Obviously." It was a low-pitched voice and should have been soft. But it wasn't. It rang like tempered steel. "How is he getting along?"

Not a word to Jak. She looked at him, but talked to Scradlo.

"Catching on all right," said the Jovian. "Likes to talk too much."

Jak flashed a grin her way at that. It was about time he began making headway. But the stare in her eyes merely turned to ice. Jak felt as if he had been cased.

"Well, you can take care of that," she said. "You know what Falk thinks of independent judgment."

And then light smote Jak; and his thinking machine, temporarily shorted by the sight of her, slipped into high gear. This piece of loveliness was *somebody* in the Meteor Makers, if she could speak so casually of Leader Falk.

And, at the same time, he wasn't going to get anywhere making an ordinary play for her. That chilling glance told him he was going to need strategy.

"You'll know how to handle him," said Thana and she turned to go.

"Wait a minute!" snapped Jak. The two turned to him in astonishment.

"Am I to understand that she's over me?" He gestured coolly at Thana, but addressed his question to Scradlo.

"What's that to you?" grated Scradlo menacingly.

"Am I to understand," pursued Jak, "that not only am I blackmailed into joining the Meteor Makers, but I also have a woman over me—a mere girl?" His voice rose in indignation.

"Insubordination?" murmured the mere girl. "So soon?"

"Listen!" Jak let his voice take on pure rage now. "I've knocked about this System for twenty years and in all that time no simpering she-male has ever—"

"That's enough!" The simpering she-male's voice had surprising power. "Scradlo! Discipline him!"

The discharger leaped into Scradlo's claw and the Jovian was leveling it. Jak's heart went cold, but he managed to curl his lip.

"Discipline, hey? Since when does one man discipline another with a discharger? I've seen men disciplined. But the ones who did the disciplining didn't have any dischargers, or ray guns, or anesthetizers—not even a length of pipe. They used what they were born with."

He waited. His heart froze more solidly with the realization that this outfit didn't operate by the Code of Space.

There was a split second of silence in the cabin. Scradlo, smiling thinly, glanced at Thana. She caught his glance and nodded.

"Put it away," she snapped, a mocking smile on her curved lips. "I never knew a Terrestrial could be fool enough to fight a Jovian with his bare hands. I'll cover you, Scradlo, in case of tricks. And leave him whole."

Scradlo, sheer delight on his raven face, walked forward as if he were going to pick up a bag of sand.

Jak let the claws almost touch him and then sent in his left and his right. He

felt his knuckles smashing through the horny beak. But he didn't wait to see what the other would do. He knew Jovians.

He ducked, and jumped forward to one side. Claws tore the air to ribbons and the Jovian screamed with rage and pain.

Jak leaped up and smashed downward with his right at the sloping base of the skull. It caught Scradlo as he was whirling around. He stumbled forward under the impact.

Jak's leap, however, brought him on Scradlo's back and they went down together. Jak knew better than to stay with him. He flung himself off desperately.

But Scradlo spun around. His claws hooked into Jak's space suit.

Jak twisted and kicked. His leaden boots thudded into the leathery, massive body. He drove punch after punch into the shattered beak. At least Scradlo wouldn't be using that on him.

II

THEN he was going up. Scradlo was lifting him like a child. And Scradlo hurled him the length of the cabin.

The instant Jak crashed, he was writhing to change his position. The impact partly paralyzed him, but he saw what was coming next. He contrived to roll over—and over.

Scradlo leaped the length of the cabin after him. It was a swooping dive, claws clenched and extended like a Terrestrial eagle dropping for the kill. And it would have been, if Jak had been content to lie there counting the pretty lights.

Scradlo's crash shook the whole ship. It rolled and then righted automatically. The Jovian lay in a heap, stunned like Jak.

And Jak swarmed over him. He whipped the Jovian's nearest arm into a bar-lock and broke it near the shoulder. Then he leaped free.

Screaming with agony, the Jovian started from his stupor. Twice the remaining good claw raked Jak, once through the space suit, furrowing his arm. But Jak had gotten away in time.

Scradlo was struggling to his feet when Jak leaped in again. This time he came

feet first. Both lead-soled boots caught the bird-man squarely on the side of the head, driving the head against the wall. There was a nasty crack and Scradlo slithered down again—to lie still.

Jak had literally bounced off the other to fall on his back. He twisted like a cat, shot to his feet, and crouched—fists ready for Scradlo's next move.

But there was no next move from Scradlo. Jak backed against a free stretch of wall and faced the girl.

She stood at the other end of the cabin, discharged ready. "Am I next?" she inquired coolly. Her eyes were steady, but there was a different expression in them, an expression of fascination.

Jak shook his head. "Not if you're going to use that on me."

Thana was silent. "Leader Falk would never forgive me," she said finally, "if he knew I even *thought* of letting any damage happen to a fighter like you."

"BUT you're not one of us—yet," she said, coldly.

It was the next day. Jak had been summoned into her presence for an interview. They sat in a small room in an out of the way corner of the station. She, coolly imperious. He, still apparently surly at the outrage of being bossed by a woman.

"You have an excellent record—for our purposes," she went on, studying her nails. Jak took the opportunity to let admiring eyes travel the length and breadth of her beauty, now that she was out of a space suit.

"I kind of liked the way you handled Scradlo. You put one of our best men out of commission—at least for the time being. But—" she shrugged "he'll pull through."

"The main thing wrong with you is—is—" Blue eyes flashed up at him and then swiftly back to her nails "is that you're too fresh. You ought to remember that you're just a new man as far as we're concerned. You've got to get a solid achievement under your belt before you can act up."

"We've lined up something for you. There's a liner leaving Terra for Venus in a couple of solar hours—days to you.

You're going to case it for us and bring it to headquarters. You'll get your orders just before you leave."

She cleared her throat and tried looking him in the eye. During all this he had stared at her steadily, mockingly. She couldn't hold his gaze; her eyes dropped and her cheeks darkened. She went on, a little desperately.

"Don't try any tricks on this assignment. Every Meteor Maker in the System will be watching you—never mind how. Leader Falk will tell you, when you report, what he thinks of the way you handle the job."

She took a deep breath and lifted her face, her chin squared. "That's about all. Have you got any questions?"

He grinned. For a minute their eyes clashed. Then he said: "Yeah, I've got a question. Or two. How did *you* get in with this outfit?"

Her eyes snapped fire then.

"What's your rank—if you have a rank?" he continued.

Her mouth dropped open.

"Yes," he snapped. "How did *you* come to join the Meteor Makers?"

She gasped. "I'll—"

"What do you hope to get out of it in the final divvy?"

She sank back as if stunned and surveyed him, shaking her head slowly. "You're the craziest recruit I've ever seen. We certainly can use nerve like that. Does it mean nothing to you that a word from me and fifty dischargers will blast you out of existence?"

Jak grinned, feeling more at ease than he had at any time since he came to Lilitth.

"You'll never speak that word."

"Why not?" she flared.

Jak took in the heightened color of softly curved cheeks and the rage in gray eyes. He laughed and stood up.

"You'll find out. Plenty of time." His voice was reedy and high, in imitation of Scradlo.

It was a good exit cue. He took it.

He waited until he reached a passage along which no one else was to be seen. He whipped a small film out of his pocket and an electrostyle, scribbled, and then crammed both out of sight while resuming his progress.

He went to the bar. Things were dif-

ferent there now, since the day he had first dropped in as Lon Bailey, the witless, spineless insurance agent. Several men, Martians and Jovians, looked up when he entered and were careful to greet him boisterously. Jak returned the greetings with a wide grin, and stepped up to the bar.

Presently a portly Terrestrial, in the uniform of a ship's captain, shouldered his way to the bar.

Jak casually dipped his hand in his pocket and began twisting and rolling the strip of film.

The captain looked up, appeared to see him for the first time, and came waddling over—a contemptuous grin on his face.

"Well, well, well!" he burred, "if it isn't Bailey, the insurance man. Been wondering since my last trip if I'd still see you here!"

Jak put an expression of viciousness on his face. "Go away and leave me alone!" he snarled. As if to emphasize his feelings, he flung down the little pill he had been fingering. It rolled over by the captain's fat hand.

"Why—why, what's the matter with you" the captain spluttered, very much taken aback. "I thought we were friends!" He petulantly waved his hand to emphasize his feelings—and then dropped it over the pill.

Jak wheeled on him savagely. "All I said was to leave me alone!" he exploded.

"All *right*, all *right*," whined the fat man, and he retreated, glaring indignantly at Jak.

Everybody laughed. Jak returned surlily to his drink. And the little rolled-up pill of film no longer lay on the bar.

THROUGH the eternal night of space rifled a trim little craft, its hull a velvety black that caught no gleam from the myriad points of fire that blazed light-ages in the distance. The speed of its initial impetus, born of bursting rockets, was undiminished by any friction, save for the negligible pull of remote bodies. Automatically a repeller beam probed ahead of it, groping for the dangerous debris of space to fling it aside. When the debris proved too large to be nudged, the action became more like a pole vault—the little ship smoothly curving around

it while automatic controls reoriented the course from the changed position.

Jak lounged back in his seat, indifferent both to automatic controls and the beauty of the star-fields. He scowled at the calculations inscribed for him on the tablet he held in his hand. He yawned and stretched. It had been a long flight. He leaned forward and peered.

There was a certain little blue planet dead ahead. His eyes sought for it, found it, and held to it, longingly. He had come from there—many long, adventure-crammed years ago. He had fled then, laughing exultantly for the freedom ahead—caring not at all that he could not return.

Now he could only stare at it wistfully. It was not for him. He was wanted there. Return, and he would only be banished from it again—by the Code of Space. Banished to serve out a life of grinding labor on some lonely outpost.

But there was a hope now. An ordeal had been set for him. If he could but redeem himself in this, he could return to that small blue light. Return, and settle down to a calm and happy life.

And yet the thought was no longer as precious as it had been. He had to admit to himself that, even there, loneliness could dog him, embittering this contentment. He could see this final triumph of his life turned to ashes.

Since his departure from Lilith he had been haunted by a face. He puzzled over it now. It was not the face it should have been—for its owner to do the things she did.

It was a face he could see in a far different setting. He could see it across a small table from him. He could see Auburn hair dancing in a breeze from an open window. He could see a strong golden light caressing a cheek. He could almost feel the touch of that cheek.

The blue point suddenly vanished. He started, and then sank back. It had dropped beneath the ship. He was nearing his rendezvous.

He cast one yearning glance over the side at Terra, now a tiny disk with Luna a faint spark off to one side, before he grasped the controls.

Flame filled the sky before him, to thin out to nothing. Again it flared, vanished. Jak took his finger off the rocket switch

and studied his instrument panel. He nodded with satisfaction. His speed was cut down to a drift. Terra had taken hold and was pulling him down to her, but gently. It would be hours before it would approach the force of a fall.

He sat and waited.

But not for long. Into his visiscreen there suddenly grew a silvery fleck. Its image swelled steadily. The fleck emerged from distance as a long liner, a flatly curved thing, built for capacity.

Tense, Jak watched it grow huge on the visiscreen, appear to turn as it passed him and presented its length, and start shrinking as it fled on toward Venus.

Then Jak jabbed the stern rocket switch, and began fingering, with an artist's touch, the port-rocket switch. He swung into motion, rockets belching, on the trail of the liner.

Grimly, he locked his controls and reached out to the dials and switches of the caser which had stood silently near him throughout his trip. He tooled the thing until it was trained on the liner, sighting along the double tubes. His thumb bore down on the button.

There was no sound. But the liner seemed to get fuzzy all over. The fuzz blossomed, became rough and harsh in outline. Too late, the liner's lateral tubes spewed fire as she sought to evade the line of iron-building that had caught her.

Jak cut in his rockets again and began a spiraling race that brought him closer to the liner while the caser, with malignant silence, laid layer after layer of iron over the now helpless liner.

Round and round went Jak, *building out* the curves of the liner. Its fore and aft disappeared and roundness came to the unwieldy mass of pure iron. Finally an almost perfect ball of metal hurtled through space under its previous momentum.

JAK lifted thumb from button and contemplated his work with awe. No wonder the Space Guards refused battle against this instrument! For the first time in the history of their organization they were up against something they dared not challenge. It wasn't a question of courage. It was a matter of sheer common sense.

Jak jerked himself back to realities. He

had further instructions to follow. But before he followed them he glanced about the blackness that surrounded him. There were the great far stars. And, nearer, there were strange flecks. He smiled a one-sided smile and bent to his task.

Out went the tractor beam to the "meteor." The little space ship's rockets spoke briefly—now to this side and now to that. The little ship began to bore steadily forward. The sun lay at right angles to its course.

And behind it flew a great mass of raw iron, to all intents and purposes a cold, inorganic body—deserving only the name of meteor.

Jak accelerated slowly, lest he lose his burden. And across space they went, at a rate any ship of the Space Guards could surpass. From time to time Jak studied the visiscreens. Those strange little flecks were still there.

And then a scowl ran down his forehead. Star-lights flicked out and on. Shadows—first one, then another, then scores more—flitted along with him, quite close. He counted twenty. He counted again—forty. He stopped counting.

The Meteor Makers had arrived. They had come to be a running guard for him. They also had seen the strange, remote flecks, and were swarming forth along his course, erupting from hidden stations on planet and asteroid, like wolves from their lairs. He was getting the protection promised him. Too much protection.

His telecaster spoke. "Sullivan. Sullivan."

He jerked the transmitter grid toward him savagely. "Speaking. Sullivan speaking."

"Keep on your course. Do not attempt to case any Space Guards unless they get within ray-range. But don't worry. We'll see that they don't."

It was a mad flight. Apparently the Meteor Makers were making no attempt to battle the Space Guards as long as the latter did not attack. The distance kept by the Space Guards was satisfactory. Jak could not make out the silvery flecks any more.

"Sullivan. Sullivan."

"Speaking. Sullivan speaking."

"Depress your horizon. Bear to star-board."

Jak followed these directions. Did this mean an attempt to evade the Guards? Or were they nearing headquarters?

The telecaster broke in again after an hour. Jak guessed from the minute nature of the directions that he was being sighted along the proper course by a ship almost dead abaft.

And then suddenly a mass stood out in space before him.

"Keep on your course! Keep on your course! Don't use your bow rockets! Keep full speed!" shouted the telecaster.

Jak would have swerved. He was headed squarely for an asteroid—a big one. His hands on the controls were tense until his knuckles grew white. This was no way to approach! This was only the way to crash!

Then it was as if the side of the asteroid fell away. An enormous hole suddenly gaped for him. He drove into it. And into a battery of repeller beams.

They caught and held him. He burrowed into the field of their combined force. How far into the asteroid he plunged he could not tell.

III

IN a few seconds he was floating along a dark cavern, dimly lit. He relaxed for a precious moment. Then he jerked erect and looked about him.

So this was headquarters! An asteroid, with caverns and galleries and tunnels blasted out of it! What light he had to see by came from windows here and there, windows that meant living and storage quarters—supplied with air and made into a permanent establishment.

Consciousness of his responsibility came to him. Where was the meteor?

And at that instant it passed him, towed by a ship. It floated helplessly on down the cavern. Jak glanced rapidly about. He was unnoticed.

He knew why. Nearly all of the ships of the Meteor Makers were occupied outside. Occupied as they had never been before.

He swung after the meteor. It went on for a while. Then it swerved out of sight. Jak hastened after it, down a side tunnel.

The journey seemed endless, tunnel after side tunnel. Suddenly the ship that had

towed the meteor shot past him, headed the other way—toward the entrance.

Jak let it pass, keeping his ship in the shadow. Then he flew back the way it had come and entered a black pocket. Flares from his bow rockets showed him the meteor, mysteriously floating in the midst of a vast cavern. He and the meteor must be near the dead center of the asteroid.

And as he came up to it, it spouted fire. A ray was biting through the iron. Another broke through. This was a signal to Jak. He trained his ray along a line between the two glowing holes, back and forth.

And another ray burst forth, making a triangle. Jak's ray industriously bit into the lines of that triangle. And soon a huge chunk of iron broke off and floated away. Beneath it shone the surface of the liner, and one of its exit ports.

"What the hell's going on here?"

Jak was ready for that. The instant the voice sounded from his telecaster he swung his ship about, ray stabbing. The sentence had hardly been finished before the Meteor Maker ship that had entered the cavern received the full blast of Jak's ray. It fused instantly and careened gently against a far wall of the cavern, a glowing mess.

But there was another behind it. And another. Even as Jak sent his ray searing at them, his heart sank. Their presence in such numbers meant one thing—that the battle outside the asteroid was going badly, or had already gone badly—for the Space Guards whom Jerry had led to the Meteor Makers' headquarters. The plan had been to overpower the gang's ships by sheer weight of numbers, but either the gang had guessed the plan or had always been prepared for such a contingency. They were free now, at any rate, to return to view their prize, the meteor Jak had brought them.

They came on. Jak's rays got two more. And then other rays joined his. Jak could have wept at the tragedy of it. Those rays came from the Space Guards secretly stowed aboard the liner, who had blasted the liner loose, and who were now emerging to give battle at what they hoped would be at least equal odds. Their part in the plan had been to make a crippling attack

from the rear and perhaps also to cripple the defenses of the Meteor Makers.

Jak could see them now, tumbling forth in their space suits and setting up their heavy ray projectors, gallantly ready to take on all the Meteor Makers. It was their rays which were even now cutting into the attacking ships of the gang. Ship after ship turned into a running inferno of tortured molten metal, to float helplessly in every direction, confusing the battle and getting in the way of both sides.

It could not go on forever. Jak, furiously swiveling his ray from ship to ship, began to wonder when it would end. When a ray would catch and blast him into eternity.

But it was not a ray that caught him. Suddenly his projector jammed. Then his visiscreen clouded over, clouded with a sudden tracery, a network of rapidly sprouting crystals. Desperately he flung his ship to one side, freed his projector and cut loose again.

It was no use, dive and twist as he might. He only dodged from one caser beam to another. The visiscreens went blank. He had one last look at the Guards, some writhing as they disappeared into lumps of iron, others retreating into the meteor through the hole they had made, a hole that was growing smaller.

And then everything was over. Jak could look everywhere, but only into a wall of iron.

DESPERATELY he turned on his projector again and let it blast against the iron. And then the projector bucked and jammed for good. Jak realized that the iron was being piled on heavily.

He shrugged. The Meteor Makers probably intended to let him stay there, to die a slow death. With a wry smile he patted his discharger. He could fool them there.

But not yet. He went through the imprisoned ship, inspecting its supplies. There was oxygen enough for several hours yet and food-concentrates for many more. Jak Sullivan knew there was such a thing as chance. Now, while he could breathe and eat, now was no time to die.

He whirled from his count of the supplies. One port gleamed strangely. The glowing iron that had a minute before been gray-black began to liquefy. The

port abruptly cracked—from the raw heat.

A ray was cutting through! Jak hastily snapped on the helmet of his space suit. Then, discharger in hand, he waited—standing well away from any blast which might come.

The wall of the ship glowed, flamed, and then shredded away in white hot fragments from the hole. The hole grew. The heat in the ship mounted. Jak, sweating in his helmet, fingered his discharger nervously.

"Come out, Sullivan!" came a harsh voice. "Come out! You haven't got a chance. Drop your discharger and jump out, hands first."

Jak raised his discharger. Better they should come and get him—one at a time, through that hole.

"Come on, Sullivan. We're not going to wait long."

Then Jak sized up the situation. They wanted him alive! They could easily have left him in there to die. He still had a chance.

He lifted his discharger, raised his hands, and leaped toward the hole. He shot out into the low-gravity field, described a long, low curve, and bumped softly to the rocky floor of the cavern. He rose cautiously to his feet, dropped the gun.

The Meteor Makers stood all about him—Martians, Venusians, Jovians, Terrestrials—their dischargers ready. A spotlight flung a circle. He stood in its glare.

And, ten feet away, there stood also in the glare a man in a black space suit. By his side stood a girl in a white space suit.

Jak put a grin on his face and bowed. "Leader Falk, I presume?"

The man did not answer. Slim and arrogant, his face was a mask. Jak bowed again toward the white space suit. "And Miss Thana. So happy to see you! The lift of her head was his only answer.

Falk spoke softly. "Very well done, Sullivan. Probably none of us could have done it better."

Jak waved a deprecating hand. "Oh, I wouldn't say that."

"But I would," purred Falk. "You were given an assignment and you carried it through. Beautifully. It's too bad it wasn't the right assignment."

"Oh, I don't know," said Jak airily. "It would have been," persisted Falk,

"if you had stopped with ours. As I say, you did it beautifully. But you went on—with the other assignment. The *wrong* assignment. We've got to find out all about that. Suppose you give us the details."

Jak shrugged. "There's really nothing to it. No details worth mentioning. Just an idea I had."

"Quite a big idea for just one man, don't you think? There must have been other people mixed up in it—all the Space Guards, for instance. We can understand the ones who attacked us outside. That has happened before. We thought they had learned. This time we gave them the biggest lesson yet. Such a big lesson that—" and Falk's voice rose with pride "that there aren't enough of them left to stand in my way any longer—"

"You don't figure you've got to beat the Space Guards, do you?" interrupted Jak. "After you get *them* licked—if you ever do—you're really just beginning. There's the whole System, for instance. What about the Mobilization Call?"

Falk permitted himself a short bark of contempt. "Don't be childish, Sullivan. We're in a position to take over any planet we want now. But I want to get this settled first. I don't like the idea of people working against me. And they must have been working against me to get a whole contingent of Guards in the dead center of Headquarters." His voice sharpened. "Who was in on it, Sullivan?"

Jak sighed. "Nobody, Falk. Just me. When I found there were Space Guards in that liner, I was so sorry for them I wanted to help them. You understand." He thought he caught a tiny gasp from the direction of the white space suit.

"No, I don't!" All the purr was gone from Falk's voice. "What you don't seem to understand is that we've got plenty of ways of making tough raiders like you talk. Look over there, Sullivan. There's the meteor you brought. Inside it are some of your Space Guard friends. The way you fought for them, we know they're your friends. Well, Sullivan, we're just going to leave them in there until you feel like talking. You've got a rough idea of how long they'll last. Now we'll just put you in a little hole we have where nothing can disturb you while you think. You

can just sit there and think about what it must be like in that meteor." The Leader made a signal. They took hold of Jak.

"Biggest mistake you ever made, Falk!" Jak managed to shout as they hustled him off.

"HOLE" was right. They dropped him into a little pocket at the end of one of the caverns they had made into living quarters. Air reached him, but not much light.

And there Jak Sullivan sat, going over the chances. Every other second, a vision came to him, a memory of the interior of a space ship—nothing to be seen from iron-darkened windows, the air going stale and bad, no sound except the voices of the men within hoarsely going over their chances. It was all very well for Jak to know what he would do in that spot—he was not the one to sit and wait for death. But he wasn't there. And he knew only a little more than they did.

Then she came—to his not very great surprise. The one known as Thana dropped down into the hole. She held a little hand-size disrupter.

"If anything happens down here that I don't like," she said evenly, "I'll give this a squeeze. It'll bring the guards."

"Space? Or Meteor Makers?" queried Jak lightly.

"You're not in such a good place for humor," she snapped.

Jak shrugged. "I know. I just can't help it. There doesn't seem to be anything better to do."

"No? Why not tell the guard you're ready to talk?"

"What good would that do?"

"Really, Sullivan, I wonder if you're sane. Joking while men die."

He caught the strange tone of her voice while she said this. "What good would it do me or them if I talked?"

She appeared to be fighting for composure. Her voice held a tremor she was hard put to it to iron out. "Do you *want* to die?" Before he could answer this, she went on. "Listen, I'm in a position to tell you something. You have made a tremendous impression on Leader Falk. The rest of the gang want your blood, but he would rather have you alive and

fighting on his side. He's got lots of men, but not very many good ones."

"What about the Space Guards?" cut in Jak.

"They'll have to pay some kind of a penalty, won't they?"

"But Falk talked as if he'd let them out if I talked."

"Well, maybe he will—"

"Yeah, maybe he will and maybe he won't! Everybody knows what Falk does to the Space Guards."

"What do you care about them for anyway?" She was actually pleading. "Why don't you want to save yourself?"

Jak studied her. The light was dim—he couldn't see her face—her eyes—her hair—

"I'll tell you why I don't to save myself. Not that way. In the first place, I've knocked about the System too long to trust a guy like Falk. How do I know that, if I talk, he won't rub me out after he's got the information he wants?"

"But, in the second place, if I'm going to save myself, it'll only be with the help of the Space Guards. That may sound crazy to you, but I can explain it—if you'll listen."

"I'm listening," she murmured, trying for sarcasm.

"I hated the Space Guards once. I got a big kick out of fighting them. To me they were simply enemies. I did 'em in whenever I got the chance."

"And then, one fine day when I was asleep on my feet, they caught me. Oh, they had a scrap on their hands. But they had me. And then they let me go."

"They—what?"

"They let me go. But first they showed me something I never knew before. I'd heard about it, just the way you've heard about it. But I really didn't know what it was. Just as you didn't really know. It's the Code of Space."

"Oh, that!" She laughed contemptuously.

"Yeah, I gave them the same answer," replied Jak gravely. "But they showed me. There's a lot to the Code of Space, Miss Thana. More than I've got time to go into here. But maybe you didn't know this about it.

"According to the Code, a man has a chance to start all over again. But if

he doesn't want to—if he wants to go on the way he is, adding to his record—then the Guards are out to get him. And when the Guards are in that mood, it's the finish.

"I happen to know they've given Falk his choice. And he's given his answer. With the caser he thinks he can beat the whole System. He thinks he can come out and *rule* the System. And with the Guards—now—it's the finish. They're out to get Falk. That means there's nothing else for Falk—and those that stick with him—but death."

"They'll never get him," said Thana, coldly.

"**M**AYBE not. But Falk will never win, either. You know about the Mobilization Call? That means that everybody else—all the millions and billions on all the planets of this System—they're out to get him, too, whether they are Space Guards or not. Lilith, that impossible little moon of Jupiter, is one of the few places where it is relatively safe for you people—and you know you have to maintain guards there now. Maybe you're even now beginning to get some idea of what it means to have the whole System against you."

"Yes, and you're in it, too, Miss Thana. Stick with Falk much longer and the Guards will get you. All the laboratories in the System right now are working on one thing and one thing only—the answer to the caser. I can't tell you when it will happen, but they'll get that answer. Falk's unbeatable as long as the caser is unbeatable. When that stops being true, you'll realize what you're in for. You'll find yourself on the run from then on—"

"What are you trying to do, frighten me?" There was real amusement in her voice.

"No, I'm trying to get you to face facts."

"I face the facts," she retorted. "I see that you're just a traitor. To clear yourself, you're turning against your friends."

"They're not my friends," retorted Jak, "if, by friends, you mean other crooks and raiders like what I used to be."

"That's just the trouble," said Thana. "You talk about the Code of Space. But

you don't know the code of a gang, because you never belonged to one. We have a code, too."

"Yeah, a very simple one," said Jak angrily. "Murder and robbery. Attacking in a gang only when the odds are in your favor. Sneaking up on your prey when they're off their guard. And strutting with the caser, knowing you're safe because—for the time being—it's the most terrible weapon yet invented."

"Very well!" flared Thana. "I can see you're hopeless. Nobody can do anything with you. I came in here to give you some good advice. All I got for my trouble were wise cracks, some nonsense about the Code of Space, and a lot of tough talk! I'm through! I've done my best!"

There was a sob in her voice as she turned away toward the hole above. Jak caught it. As surely as he would catch the sputter in a rocket motor that meant something wrong.

"Thana?" He spoke softly. She stopped, but without turning back to him. Again he spoke her name.

And, as if in a trance, she wheeled and fell into his arms. He held her silently, his face grim. So she, too, was in a trap!

Her voice came, muffled against his shoulder. "Oh, why can't you be sensible? Don't you realize anything I ask of Falk I can have? He'll let you live, if I say so!"

"Don't be silly," said Jak gently. "You belong to him. He'd never tolerate me if he knew about this, even if he had nothing else against me."

"Oh, but he will. He'll do anything I say!"

Jak laughed. "You can't tell me that! He may be crazy about you and say he'll do anything for you, but he wouldn't give you over to me just on your say-so."

"And I say he will. I know he will!"

"But," protested Jak in amazement, "why should he?"

"Because my father invented the caser."

Everything about Jak Sullivan froze—except his mind.

"You're Thana Carson!"

She clapped her hand over his mouth. "Don't say that!" she whispered fiercely. "Falk kills anybody who uses that name!"

"Your father was the great physicist, William Carson."

"Don't!" she begged. "That's death, too!"

"He disappeared about ten years ago."

"Yes, yes. My father just ran away and I've never seen him since. After that Falk, who was his assistant, took me away. He said there was no one else to look after me. I was still just a child."

"You're wrong! You're wrong!" Jak could hardly speak for gasping at the tremendous facts taking shape in his mind. "Your father never ran away. That was just Falk's story. Everybody believed it until they tore down the Carson Laboratory and dug a new foundation for a dwelling unit. They found a big lump of iron—"

Thana Carson's eyes grew big. She grew rigid. Jak suddenly flinched at the task that lay before him. He swallowed and went on.

"They were just going to melt it down. But a geologist wanted to analyze it—it was a strange place for a lump of pure iron—very pure iron—and, well," he concluded lamely, "they found enough—"

IV

HE caught her as she sagged sideways, and laid her carefully on the floor. He set about chafing her wrists, glancing nervously up at the hole. In a moment he had her sitting up, shaking her head. Then her memory returned; she gasped and choked on a sob. But she rallied—to speak. And her voice was as Jak had first heard it. But even harder.

"So Falk killed my father. Turned my father's own invention on him. Just the same as buried him alive. And my wondering all this time why I couldn't bring myself to like him. When did they discover—the—the—?"

"About two years after Falk cleared out, taking you with him. They looked around for another—for you, thinking he had done the same to you."

"I remember now," she said slowly. "There was a time when Falk kept me away from everybody and from all new-casts. Oh—"

Jak patted her shoulder. Then she straightened.

"Okay, Space Guard," and her voice was like steel, "let's go. When do we start?" She got to her feet.

"Start? Where? How?" Jak was casual.

"Why, out of here—and after him."

"Yeah," muttered Jak. "Just like that. Out of here. And after him. Clean up on the whole gang while we're at it. Never mind the casers."

She slumped against him. "We haven't got a chance!"

His arms went around her, he stroked her head in grim silence.

"It doesn't look so good. If it were just ray guns, we could cook up a fighting chance. Some stunt of collecting a ship apiece and blasting our way out. But I'm not that big a fool. A second's work with a caser—and our little adventure would be over."

She said softly. "Go ahead."

"Look, you've got a chance by yourself. You can go anywhere. Just don't let Falk know what you know. Simply mosey out of here as if you were going for a ride—"

"Stop that!" Her voice was stern, but quivering. "I've got a code of my own. Catch me leaving a good man to die!"

"Don't be a little fool! Sooner or later, Falk will find out you know. The only way to save his skin then will be to case you. I see him hesitating!"

She was silent.

"Well?" His voice was lightly inquiring. "What's—"

He never finished the sentence. Her hand was on his arm. And the fingers were steel probes.

"The caser!" she gasped. "The answer to the caser!"

"Wh-what—what's the matter?"

"You said something a while back about finding the answer to the caser, that someday someone would find it. And as you said it." Her voice fell into a sharp whisper, "something did a flipflop in the back of my mind. Listen!"

"When my father had just perfected this invention, he told me all about it one day—just as I was going to bed. My mother died at my birth and Pop always put me to bed—" Her voice caught a little—"no matter how busy he was. Well, this night he talked about this thing. Told me how it would revolutionize science

and life—how it could *make* any desired substance out of nothing. And the way a little girl would, I suppose, I asked him if there was any way of undoing what his invention could do. And he laughed and said, yes, it was very simple. Just a matter of vibration—"

"Vibration!" burst from Jak. "Vibration," he muttered. "What else did he say?"

"That's all I seem to remember," said Thana sadly.

"But that's a lot!" exploded Jak. "Let me think. I'm not a scientist—just a mechanic." He grabbed Thana. "Matter vibrates! Atoms oscillate, molecules vibrate in rhythm—upset that rhythm—and you upset the whole balance that keeps them interlocking! They used that principle in a disintegrator, back in the days of the Continental Wars on Terra. Since then everything's been made of an alloy—they had to stop making anything out of pure metal." He clamped his mouth tight shut to keep from yelling, and drove his fist into his hand instead. "Got it!" he whispered exultantly, "got it! All we need is the vibratory constant of iron!"

"But—how can we do anything with it?" exclaimed Thana. "Just how and where can we find this vibration?"

"Yeah, and I'm no scientist," admitted Jak again. "Even a scientist would have to *study* before he could find the precise rhythm of a given element. But we've got to try—say!"

He seized her again. "We could find it—by trial and error. Give me anything to vibrate at varying speeds. All we have to do is step it up or down—until we hit it. Thana, do you know where this gang stores its unshipped motors? You know, auxiliaries, generators, anything?"

"Sure!"

"Think you can go quick, get one aboard an unguarded ship, and get me on that ship?"

"Darling, I can only try!"

"Then get going! Go as fast as you can, without making them suspicious!"

She turned to go, and then turned back. Fiercely then he embraced her, his lips warm on hers. Then he pushed her toward the hole.

"We've got no time to waste!"

She was gone, leaving him to pace fretfully.

JAK had no way of telling how long he waited. But it seemed like something over a parsec. And he sweated the sweat of a man agonizing for action.

In between his feverish calculations ran thoughts of the men trapped in the meteor. Could he get to them in time? And suppose he wasted precious time hacking through to them somehow—only to find them all dead—suffocated? Wouldn't he be wiser to give them up for lost and devote his and Thana's energies to blasting their way out of the Meteor Makers' stronghold?

That was going to be some job—any way he looked at it! But it was supremely important that they tear themselves loose and contact the outside with their solution of the problem of the caser.

But—he didn't have that solution yet! He laughed bitterly. He, with his rough and ready smattering of mechanics! He was going to have to find the vibratory constant of pure iron. And no well-appointed laboratory lay at his disposal, even if he knew how to use one. Nobody was going to wait patiently while he fumbled along and carefully checked his results. Why, he couldn't *begin* his experiment until danger was upon him—when the caser would be laying layer and layer of iron around them. And failure was sure death!

And suddenly she was reaching into the hole, bringing blessed relief from the torture of waiting.

"I anesthetized the guard!" she gasped. "Thought it was better than running the risk of his questions! Hurry!"

"Good girl!" said Jak. He caught her hand and leaped after her. They ran lightly along the passage. Thana led the way to a long, slick-hulled ship and they fell, scrambling, into its normal gravity.

Too quick for her words, Jak spotted the antique generator. He sprang upon it like a tiger and began dragging it aft. Thana followed, puzzled.

"No, you stand guard!" he snapped and heaved against the little motor, leaving her to stand tensely in the cabin.

He wrestled his prize back into the tube room where stood the mechanism of the

rockets. There he stripped the housing off one of the drives, wrenched a series of gears from an auxiliary, and set to work like one possessed—connecting the generator to the main drive and welding it to the outer hull. Minutes slipped by as his fingers raced and sweat poured from his face.

He was fitting a vacuum clutch to the generator when Thana came flying back. "Something's up!" she gasped. "Falk is giving orders like mad. They must have found the guard!"

"Stick with the telecaster!" he grated. "Find out their plans!" She turned and fled, and he flung himself back at his task. The clutch fitted, he hurriedly soldered a lump of lead to the axle of the generator. "If only," he prayed, "if only she don't fly to pieces in ten minutes!" He swarmed over his work with a wrench, tightening the whole rig.

Thana came flying again, her face white.

"It's the Space Guards! They're breaking out!"

Jak dropped the wrench, stunned. Then he exploded: "Good boys! We've got to go to them!"

"No! No!" she pleaded. "Now is our chance! Now we can escape, with all the excitement they're causing!"

"We can't leave them—to fight against the caser!" shouted Jak.

"But I don't want to die—just when we were about to win free!"

He stood over her then, wrench in hand and looking very ugly. "You forget the Code. We don't win free—*without them!*"

She stared into his flaming eyes. Her own faltered, and fell. She swayed slightly—and then steadied. Her chin came up. "You're right—I forgot the Code of Space. I'd better start learning it."

He swept her into his arms for one fierce second. Then he spun her about and pushed her away.

"Get going! To the Space Guards! You take the controls and I'll be with you in a second!"

THE cavern leaped into light as the rockets roared. The ship hurtled out into the passage—a chalk-faced girl in the cabin and a taut young man in the tube room.

The generator gave forth an ungodly

chatter. The hull buzzed. Thana could feel the vibration. To Jak, sliding the clutch gently in and out to test increase and decrease of frequency, it was a hymn from heaven. He let the clutch in and the generator climbed the scale. The pitch became weird, high. The generator's outlines became a vague blur.

He ran forward after releasing the clutch and seized the controls from Thana. Barely in time. As the ship roared into the cavern where the meteor had been left, his keen eyes took in the situation at a glance.

The Space Guards were deployed over the floor of the cavern, no two of them together. Using the low gravity as an aid, they were leaping aloft in great arcs. When they landed, they immediately scrambled to their feet and took off again.

They were very hard to hit. But all they were fighting with were hand ray projectors and dischargers. They were fighting magnificently, but futilely. Their rays and bolts made practically no impression on the well-armored ships of the Meteor Makers.

And the latter were beginning to catch on to the tactics of the Space Guards. Jak just had time to see a Guard caught at the peak of his parabola-like flight. He winced as the man writhed and then literally grew into a lump of iron which changed its course and sank quickly to the floor.

"Stand by to take on the Guards!" he yelled to Thana.

And then Jak was in the fight. At wildly flinging a ship about, while he neatly manipulated the ray gun, he needed to give odds to no man. And now he knew how to fight in this cavern. Right and left he cut them down. Always he kept on the move and always he rode their tails. He could tell by the way his ship handled that stray caser beams were finding it, leaving excrescences of pure iron. But no one of them could keep the caser on him long enough. As it was, they were occasionally casing one another.

In no time, the cavern was a madhouse. For Jak it was quite simple. All he had to do was ray every ship in sight. The place was soon filled with glowing hulks and wrecks drifting to the ground.

Jak worked his way back toward the

entrance, cutting down the few remaining ships with rapid blasts of his ray. He settled gently to the floor to one side of the entrance and began firing at the ships which Falk was sending in as reinforcements. The size of the passage prevented their entering except by twos and threes.

Meanwhile Thana had flung open the entrance port, and the surviving Space Guards were coming in great springs across the cavern floor. They tumbled aboard, gasping and staggering. Thana clanged the port to on the last one and immediately Jak nosed the ship over the pile of wreckage he had made at the entrance.

As the ray bit into the passage ahead, the Meteor Makers' ships doubled back in confusion. Thana jumped to Jak's side.

"Take a turn to your left!" she screamed.

Jak saw the hole and swung into it.

"Let me have the controls!" demanded Thana. "I know these passages."

Jak nodded and stepped away, heading for the tube room. A Space Guard stopped him.

"Great work, Sullivan! We'll never get out of here alive, but—"

"Don't talk too soon!" snapped Jak.

The other shrugged. "But the caser—?"

Jak let a look of dismay come to his face. "The caser! My sun! I'd forgotten about that!" And he turned aft, leaving the Space Guard to stare after him in amazement.

It came. Three ships awaited them at an intersection, casers ready. Others lurked beyond. Thana saw them, but too late.

It was like running off a road into a swamp. Almost immediately the ports frosted over. Thana screamed and raced back to Jak, but he had already guessed from the sluggish motions of the ship. As she flung herself gasping into the tube room, he was in the act of letting in the clutch.

But his face was haggard with fear.

"I forgot something! If they get to the rocket tubes and stop the main drive, we're licked!" he moaned. "Thana! At all costs keep the tubes wide open!" Thana flew forward again.

As he spoke the little generator was climbing the scale. He glanced at a port. No change!

As the ship began to buzz and chatter peculiarly, the Space Guards glanced at each other, frowning with astonishment. Then their faces became grimaces as the pitch ascended to an inhuman frequency.

Jak prayed over the generator. It showed no immediate signs of disintegrating, but it was hard to tell. It was nothing more than a blur, a screaming, raging blur.

Outside, coat after coat of pure iron was being laid on. The ports showed only gray-black.

But the tubes still roared. And the generator was almost at peak speed. Jak licked dry lips and glanced at a port.

Then he sprang like a madman to the clutch. The port was no longer solid gray-black. A rime of dust was dancing jerkily to rhythm around its frame!

V

JAK gentled the clutch back and the hideous whine sank a note. He studied the port. No more dust. He let it in again.

And his hands became like the iron he was trying to dissolve as he saw the shifting clouds of dust outside the port. In a voice cracked with frenzy he bellowed until the Guards came. He instructed one of them to hold that clutch just so and staggered happily forward.

Thana and the Guards stared dumbfounded at the ports. Through great swirling clouds of pulverized iron dust they could make out the passages. And the ships of the Meteor Makers that were swarming about them.

"Let 'em have it!" roared Jak. Thana ran to the controls. A Space Guard took over the ray gun. And Jak settled himself behind the caser.

"How do you like that?" he gritted as he swung the silent apparatus about. The ray at his side stabbed evilly here and there, blasting ships as only a Space Guard knew how. The other Space Guards were clamoring for a turn at the thing. Ships reeled right and left—some of them bright infernos for their crews. And some iron-mantled tombs.

"I'm making for the main passage!" shouted Thana. "They can block us anywhere else!"

"Good girl!" yelled back Jak. "How

far've we got to go to reach open space?"

"Almost from dead center! About fifty miles!"

Jak relaxed for a moment as Thana rifled the ship expertly through the tortuous passages. Then he spoke to the Space Guard next to him.

"Fifty miles of one tough fight ahead of us."

The Guard, a towering Jovian, only nodded coldly. "I wouldn't ask for less."

Then Jak went to Thana and took the controls from her. They had just reached the main passage.

"From now on it's combat flying," he said. "You take the caser."

The main passage was filled with ships flitting this way and that, obviously expecting Jak's ship to erupt from any of the side passages.

Jan was among them and through them like a bolt from a discharger. He was in and around and under and past them before they could direct their fire. He began to weave a tortuous pattern down the main passage, leaving in his wake scorched and broken, or iron-coated ships, as Thana and the Space Guard worked their weapons.

Then, ahead, he saw what seemed to be a wall. It *was* a wall, a veritable shield of the pirate ships—massed from side to side and from floor to roof—waiting. Like a dog worrying a herd of cattle he danced his ship right up to them, skittering, shuttling, shifting.

And the ray bit into that wall. Ship after ship glowed and fell—past him toward the asteroid's center.

And the caser was at work, too. Some of the falling ships were unrecognizable masses of pure iron.

All aboard the ship had forgotten in the heat of battle that it carried with it a weird song, begotten of a screaming fury of a generator. They no longer seemed to notice how the hull sang inhumanly. They only knew that the casers, by the hundred, were trained upon it—because they must be. And they knew that in the long history of the caser it was for the first time—*not casing!* One caser was working—but not in the hands of a Meteor Maker!

The wall ahead of Jerry began to crumble. Ships were darting into place from

reserves beyond, but they could not find their places fast enough to keep pace with the holes being blasted.

"Look out behind!" yelled a Space Guard, and Jerry swung about in a savage sortie back down the passage that left lumps of wreckage falling into the depths. Then he turned and charged at the wall of ships again.

SUDDENLY rays lashed out—from one ship, then another, then from several. The caser had been abandoned.

But this move of the Meteor Makers was too late. Jerry was already sifting past the point where the wall had been. And again he took up his mad, spiraling, wobbling course up the main passage.

He laughed excitedly. "I fought you guys like this off Venus once!" he yelled to the Space Guard now on the ray.

The man, a Venusian, showed his teeth and nodded.

Jerry skipped this way and that, dodging the clumsily-stabbing rays of the Meteor Makers.

"Looks as if they don't know how to fight this way!" barked the Venusian.

"Too many years of soft pickings with the caser!" shot back Jak. "Some of them have even forgotten how to fly," he added as the enemy ships began colliding with each other.

Suddenly Thana grabbed Jak's arm. "The entrance gate! The big entrance gate to the outside! They've shut it!"

And ahead of them they could see the solid walls across the entrance.

"I'll not be stopped now!" raged Jak.

He swung the ship about in its tracks and touched off the bow rockets to back up to the gate. He slapped a repellor ray on the passage wall. Then he slammed on the stern rockets, the most powerful ones.

Ahead of them, down the passage whence they had fought their way, Thana and a new Space Guard shot a barrage of ray and casing beams. And behind them livid fire tore into the wall of the gate.

It didn't last long. There was a sudden

jerk, and the repellor ray thrust the ship through the torn gap of the gate. They shot out into space before the repellor ray lost its power against the retreating asteroid and the rockets slowed the ship.

"That man Sullivan's a genius!" breathed a Space Guard.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet!" snapped Jak. "Look at the damage we did to that lovely gate. Such a nasty hole! Why don't we fix it up, Thana?"

"Right away!" cried Thana. She trained the caser on the jagged hole.

And iron grew out from its edges. A ship stuck its nose out and fell back. Another. Then rays weaved forth futilely from the diminishing hole.

But the iron grew inexorably. Soon the hole was covered. Then it was a matter of laying on coat after coat.

"Sure there's no other way out?" queried Jak.

Thana shook her head. "If there is, they kept it a secret from me."

"Then make it tight, darling."

"Yes, darling."

They hung there outside the asteroid until the iron over that entrance was a small mountain.

Then Jak pulled her away from the deadly thing. Pulled her away and turned her about to face the Space Guards. Simply he told them the story of Thana Carson.

"I want you fellows to put in a good word for her," he concluded. "She really never knew what she was doing while she was with the Meteor Makers. If what I say has any weight, I'll hold myself responsible for her."

A Martian stepped forward. "After this day's work, we'll see you two through," he said with his twisted Martian smile. "You have nothing to worry about."

Jak turned to Thana.

"Did you hear what the man said?" he murmured.

"Yes," she answered as she lifted her face unashamedly to his. "*We* have nothing to worry about."

GRIFTERS' ASTEROID

By H. L. GOLD

Harvey and Joe were the slickest con-men ever to gyp a space-lane sucker. Or so they thought! Angus Johnson knew differently. He charged them five buckos for a glass of water—and got it!



"You dirty crook!" Joe roared.
"Robbing honest spacemen!"

Illustration by Lubbers

CHARACTERISTICALLY, Harvey Ellsworth tried to maintain his dignity, though his parched tongue was almost hanging out. But Joe Mallon, with

no dignity to maintain, lurched across the rubbish-strewn patch of land that had been termed a spaceport. When Harvey staggered pontifically into the battered

metalloy saloon—the only one on Planet-oid 42—his tall, gangling partner was already stumbling out, mouthing something incoherent. They met in the doorway, violently.

"We're delirious!" Joe cried. "It's a mirage!"

"What is?" asked Harvey through a mouthful of cotton.

Joe reeled aside, and Harvey saw what had upset his partner. He stared, speechless for once.

In their hectic voyages from planet to planet, the pair of panacea purveyors had encountered the usual strange life-forms. But never had they seen anything like the amazing creature in that colonial saloon.

Paying no attention to them, it was carrying a case of liquor in two hands, six siphons in two others, and a broom and dustpan in the remaining pair. The bartender, a big man resembling the plumpish Harvey in build, was leaning negligently on the counter, ordering this impossible being to fill the partly-emptied bottles, squeeze fruit juice and sweep the floor, all of which the native did simultaneously.

"Nonsense," Harvey croaked uncertainly. "We have seen enough queer things to know there are always more."

He led the way inside. Through thirst-cracked lips he rasped: "Water—quick!"

Without a word, the bartender reached under the counter, brought out two glasses of water. The interplanetary con-men drank noisily, asked for more, until they had drunk eight glasses. Meanwhile, the bartender had taken out eight jiggers and filled them with whiskey.

Harvey and Joe were breathing hard from having gulped the water so fast, but they were beginning to revive. They noticed the bartender's impersonal eyes studying them shrewdly.

"Strangers, eh?" he asked at last.

"Solar salesmen, my colonial friend," Harvey answered in his usual lush manner. "We purvey that renowned Martian remedy, *La-anago Yergis*, the formula for which was recently discovered by ourselves in the ancient ruined city of *La-anago*. Medical science is unanimous in proclaiming this magic medicine the sole panacea in the entire history of therapeutics."

"Yeah?" said the bartender disinterestedly, polishing the chaser glasses without washing them. "Where you heading?"

"Out of Mars for Ganymede. Our condenser broke down, and we've gone without water for five ghastly days."

"Got a mechanic around this dumping ground you call a port?" Joe asked.

"We did. He came near starving and moved on to Titan. Ships don't land here unless they're in trouble."

"Then where's the water lead-in? We'll fill up and push off."

"Mayor takes care of that," replied the saloon owner. "If you gents're finished at the bar, your drinks'll be forty buckos."

Harvey grinned puzzledly. "We didn't take any whiskey."

"Might as well. Water's five buckos a glass. Liquor's free with every chaser."

Harvey's eyes bulged. Joe gulped. "That—that's robbery!" the lanky man managed to get out in a thin quaver.

The barkeeper shrugged. "When there ain't many customers, you gotta make more on each one. Besides—"

"Besides nothing!" Joe roared, finding his voice again. "You dirty crook—robbing poor spacemen! You—"

Harvey nudged him warningly. "Easy, my boy, easy." He turned to the bartender apologetically. "Don't mind my friend. His adrenal glands are sometimes overactive. You were going to say—?"

THE round face of the barkeeper had assumed an aggrieved expression.

"Folks are always thinkin' the other feller's out to do 'em," he said, shaking his head. "Lemme explain about the water here. It's bitter as some kinds of sin before it's purified. Have to bring it in with buckets and make it sweet. That takes time and labor. Waddya think—I was chargin' feller critters for water just out of devilment? I charge because I gotta."

"Friend," said Harvey, taking out a wallet and counting off eight five-bucko bills, "here is your money. What's fair is fair, and you have put a different complexion on what seemed at first to be an unconscionable interjection of a middleman between Nature and man's thirst."

The saloon man removed his dirty apron and came around the bar.

"If that's an apology, I accept it. Now the mayor'll discuss filling your tanks. That's me. I'm also justice of the peace, official recorder, fire chief. . . ."

"And chief of police, no doubt," said Harvey jocosely.

"Nope. That's my son, Jed. Angus Johnson's my name. Folks here just call me Chief. I run this town, and run it right. How much water will you need?"

Joe estimated quickly. "About seventy-five liters, if we go on half rations," he answered. He waited apprehensively.

"Let's say ten buckos a liter," he mayor said. "On account of the quantity, I'm able to quote a bargain price. Shucks, boys, it hurts me more to charge for water than it does for you to pay. I just got to, that's all."

The mayor gestured to the native, who shuffled out to the tanks with them. The planetoid men worked the pump while the mayor intently watched the crude level-gauge, crying "Stop!" when it registered the proper amount. Then Johnson rubbed his thumb on his index finger and wetted his lips expectantly.

Harvey bravely counted off the bills. He asked: "But what are we to do about replenishing our battery fluid? Ten buckos a liter would be preposterous. We simply can't afford it."

Johnson's response almost floored them. "Who said anything about charging you for battery water? You can have all you want for nothing. It's just the purified stuff that comes so high."

After giving them directions that would take them to the free-water pool, the ponderous factotum of Planetoid 42 shook hands and headed back to the saloon. His six-armed assistant followed him inside.

"Now do you see, my hot-tempered colleague?" said Harvey as he and Joe picked up buckets that hung on the tank. "Johnson, as I saw instantly, is the victim of a difficult environment, and must charge accordingly."

"Just the same," Joe griped, "paying for water isn't something you can get used to in ten minutes."

In the fragile forest, they soon came across a stream that sprang from the igneous soil and splashed into the small pond whose contents, according to the

mayor, was theirs for the asking. They filled their buckets and hauled them to the ship, then returned for more.

IT was on the sixth trip that Joe caught a glimpse of Jupiter-shine on a bright surface off to the left. The figure, 750, with the bucko sign in front of it, was still doing acrobatics inside his skull and keeping a faint suspicion alive in him. So he called Harvey and they went to investigate.

Among the skimpy ground-crawling vines, they saw a long slender mound that was unmistakably a buried pipe.

"What's this doing here?" Harvey asked, puzzled. "I thought Johnson had to transport water in pails."

"Wonder where it leads to," Joe said uneasily.

"It leads to the saloon," said Harvey, his eyes rapidly tracing the pipe back toward the spaceport. "What I am concerned with is where it leads from."

Five minutes later, panting heavily from the unaccustomed exertion of scrambling through the tangle of planetorial undergrowth, they burst into the open—before a clear, sparkling pool.

Mutely, Harvey pointed out a pipe-end jutting under the water.

"I am growing suspicious," he said in a rigidly controlled voice.

But Joe was already on his knees, scooping up a handful of water and tasting it.

"Sweet!" he snarled.

They rushed back to the first pool, where Joe again tasted a sample. His mouth went wry. "Bitter! He uses only one pool, the sweet one! The only thing that needs purifying around here is that blasted mayor's conscience."

"The asteroidal Poobah has tricked us with a slick come-on," said Harvey slowly. His eyes grew cold. "Joseph, the good-natured artist in me has become a hard and merciless avenger. I shall not rest until we have had the best of this colonial con-man! Watch your cues from this point hence."

Fists clenched, the two returned to the saloon. But at the door they stopped and their fists unclenched.

"Thought you gents were leaving," the mayor called out, seeing them frozen in the doorway. "Glad you didn't. Now

you can meet my son, Jed. Him and me are the whole Earthman population of Johnson City."

"You don't need any more," said Harvey, dismayed.

Johnson's eight-foot son, topped by a massive roof of sun-bleached hair and held up by a foundation that seemed immovable, had obviously been born and raised in low gravity. For any decent-sized world would have kept him down near the general dimensions of a man.

He held out an acre of palm. Harvey studied it worriedly, put his own hand somewhere on it, swallowed as it closed, then breathed again when his fingers were released in five units instead of a single compressed one.

"Pleased to meet you," piped a voice that had never known a dense atmosphere.

The pursuit of vengeance, Harvey realized, had taken a quick and unpleasant turn. Something shrewd was called for . . .

"Joseph!" he exclaimed, looking at his partner in alarm. "Don't you feel well?"

Even before the others could turn to him, Joe's practiced eyes were gently crossing. He sagged against the door frame, all his features drooping like a bloodhound's.

"Bring him in here!" Johnson cried. "I mean, get him away! He's coming down with asteroid fever!"

"Of course," replied Harvey calmly. "Any fool knows the first symptoms of the disease that once scourged the universe."

"What do you mean, *once*?" demanded Johnson. "I come down with it every year, and I ain't hankering to have it in an off-season. Get him out of here!"

"In good time. He can't be moved immediately."

"Then he'll be here for months!"

Harvey helped Joe to the counter and lifted him up on it. The mayor and his gigantic offspring were cowering across the room, trying to breathe in tiny, uncontaminating gasps.

"You'll find everything you want in the back room," Johnson said frantically. sulfopyridine, mustard plasters, rubs, inhalers, suction cups—"

"Relics of the past," Harvey stated. "One medication is all modern man requires to combat the dread menace, asteroid fever."

"What's that?" asked the mayor without conviction.

Instead of replying, Harvey hurried outside to the ungainly second-hand rocket ship in the center of the shabby spaceport. He returned within a few minutes, carrying a bottle.

JOE was still stretched out on the bar, panting, his eyes slowly crossing and uncrossing. Harvey lifted the patient's head tenderly, put the bottle to his lips and tilted it until he was forced to drink. When Joe tried to pull away, Harvey was inexorable. He made his partner drink until most of the liquid was gone. Then he stepped back and waited for the inevitable result.

Joe's performance was better than ever. He lay supine for several moments, his face twisted into an expression that seemed doomed to perpetual wryness. Slowly, however, he sat up and his features straightened out.

"Are—are you all right?" asked the mayor anxiously.

"Much better," said Joe in a weak voice.

"Maybe you need another dose," Harvey suggested.

Joe recoiled. "I'm fine now!" he cried, and sprang off the bar to prove it.

Astonished, Johnson and his son drew closer. They searched Joe's face, and then the mayor timidly felt his pulse.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Johnson ejaculated.

"*La-anago Yergis* never fails, my friend," Harvey explained. "By actual test, it conquers asteroid fever in from four to twenty-three minutes, depending on the severity of the attack. Luckily, we caught this one before it grew formidable."

The mayor's eyes became clouded mirrors of an inward conflict. "If you don't charge too much," he said warily, "I might think of buying some."

"We do not sell this unbelievable remedy," Harvey replied with dignity. "It sells itself."

"'Course, I'd expect a considerable reduction if I bought a whole case," said Johnson.

"That would be the smallest investment you could make, compared with the vast loss of time and strength the fever involves."

"How much?" asked the mayor unhappily.

"For you, since you have taken us in so hospitably, a mere five hundred bucks."

Johnson did not actually stagger back, but he gave the impression of doing so. "F-four hundred," he offered.

"Not a red cent less than four seventy-five," Harvey said flatly.

"Make it four fifty," quavered Johnson.

"I dislike haggling," said Harvey.

The final price, however, was four hundred and sixty-nine bucks and fifty redsents. Magnanimously, Harvey added: "And we will include, *gratis*, an elegant bottle-opener, a superb product of Mercurian handicraftsmanship."

Johnson stabbed out a warning finger. "No tricks now. I want a taste of that stuff. You're not switching some worthless junk on me."

Harvey took a glass from the bar and poured him a generous sample. The mayor sniffed it, grimaced, then threw it down his gullet. The ensuing minute saw a grim battle between a man and his stomach, a battle which the man gradually won.

"There ain't no words for that taste," he gulped when it was safe to talk again.

"Medicine," Harvey propounded, "should taste like medicine." To Joe he said: "Come, my esteemed colleague. We must perform the sacred task to which we have dedicated ourselves."

With Joe stumbling along behind, he left the saloon, crossed the clearing and entered the ship. As soon as they were inside, Joe dropped his murderous silence and cried:

"What kind of a dirty trick was that, giving me poison instead of that snake oil?"

"That was not poison," Harvey contradicted quietly. "It was *La-anago Yergis* extract, plus."

"Plus what—arsenic?"

"Now, Joseph! Consider my quandary when I came back here to manufacture our specific for all known ailments, with the intention of selling yonder asteroidal tin-horn a bill of medical goods—an entire case, mind you. Was I to mix the extract with the water for which we had been swindled to the tune of ten bucks a liter? Where would our profit have been,

then? No; I had to use the bitter free water, of course."

"But why use it on me?" Joe demanded furiously.

Harvey looked reprovingly at his gangling partner. "Did Johnson ask to taste it, or did he not? One must look ahead, Joseph. I had to produce the same *medicine* that we will now manufacture. Thus, you were a guinea pig for a splendid cause."

"Okay, okay," Joe said. "But you shoulda charged him more."

"Joseph, I promise you that we shall get back every redsent of which that swindler cheated us, besides whatever other funds or valuables he possesses. We could not be content with less."

"Well, we're starting all right," admitted Joe. "How about that thing with six arms? He looks like a valuable. Can't we grab him off?"

Harvey stopped filling bottles and looked up pensively.

"I have every hope of luring away the profitable monstrosity. Apparently you have also surmised the fortune we could make with him. At first I purpose to exhibit him on our interplanetary tours with our streamlined panecea; he would be a spectacular attraction for bucolic suckers. Later, a brief period of demonstrating his abilities on the audio-visiphone. Then our triumph—we shall sell him at a stupendous figure to the zoo!"

JOE was still dazed by that monetary vista when he and Harvey carried the case of medicine to the saloon. The mayor had already cleared a place of honor in the cluttered back room, where he told them to put it down carefully. Then he took the elaborate bottle-opener Harvey gave him, reverently uncorked a bottle and sampled it. It must have been at least as good as the first; he gagged.

"That's the stuff, all right," he said, swallowing hard. He counted out the money into Harvey's hand, at a moderate rate that precariously balanced between his pleasure at getting the fever remedy and his pain at paying for it. Then he glanced out to see the position of Jupiter, and asked: "You gents eaten yet? The restaurant's open now."

Harvey and Joe looked at each other.

They hadn't been thinking about food at all, but suddenly they realized that they were hungry.

"It's only water we were short of," Harvey said apprehensively. "We've got rations back at the ship."

"*H-mph!*" the mayor grunted. "Powdered concentrates. Compressed pap. Suit yourselves. We treat our stomachs better here. And you're welcome to our hospitality."

"Your hospitality," said Harvey, "depends on the prices you charge."

"Well, if that's what's worrying you, you can stop worrying," answered the mayor promptly. "What's more, the kind of dinner I serve here you can't get anywhere else for any price."

Swiftly, Harvey conned the possibilities of being bilked again. He saw none.

"Let's take a look at the menu, anyhow, Joe," he said guardedly.

Johnson immediately fell into the role of "mine host."

"Come right in, gents," he invited. "Right into the dining room."

He seated them at a table, which a rope tied between posts made more or less private, though nobody else was in the saloon and there was little chance of company.

Genius, the six-armed native, appeared from the dingy kitchen with two menus in one hand, two glasses of water in another, plus napkins, silverware, a pitcher, plates, saucers, cups, and their cocktails, which were on the house. Then he stood by for orders.

Harvey and Joe studied the menu critically. The prices were phenomenally low. When they glanced up at Johnson in perplexity, he grinned, bowed and asked: "Everything satisfactory, gents?"

"Quite," said Harvey. "We shall order."

For an hour they were served amazing dishes, both fresh and canned, the culinary wealth of this planetoid and all the system. And the service was as extraordinary as the meal itself. With four hands, Genius played deftly upon a pair of mellow Venusian *viotars*, using his other two hands for waiting on the table.

"He absolutely must purchase this incredible specimen," Harvey whispered excitedly when Johnson and the native were both in the kitchen, attending to the next course. "He would make any society

hostess's season a riotous success, which should be worth a great sum to women like Mrs. van Schuyler-Morgan, merely for his hire."

"Think of a fast one fast," Joe agreed. "You're right."

"But I dislike having to revise my opinion of a man so often," complained Harvey. "I wish Johnson would stay either swindler or honest merchant. This dinner is worth at least twenty buckos, yet I estimate our check at a mere bucko twenty redsents."

The mayor's appearance prevented them from continuing the discussion.

"It's been a great honor, gents," he said. "Ain't often I have visitors, and I like the best, like you two gents."

As if on cue, Genius came out and put the check down between Joe and Harvey. Harvey picked it up negligently, but his casual air vanished in a yelp of horror.

"What the devil is this?" he shouted. "How do you arrive at this fantastic, idiotic figure—*three hundred and twenty-eight buckos!*"

JOHNSON didn't answer. Neither did Genius; he simply put on the table, not a fingerbowl, but a magnifying glass. With one of his thirty fingers he pointed politely to the bottom of the menu.

Harvey focused on the microscopic print, and his face went pasty with rage. The minute note read: "Services and entertainment, 327 buckos 80 redsents."

"You can go to hell!" Joe growled. "We won't pay it!"

Johnson sighed ponderously. "I was afraid you'd act like that," he said with regret. He pulled a tin badge out of his rear pocket, pinned it on his vest, and twisted his holstered gun into view. "Afraid I'll have to ask the sheriff to take over."

Johnson, the "sheriff," collected the money, and Johnson, the "restaurateur," pocketed it. Meanwhile, Harvey tipped Joe the sign to remain calm.

"My friend," he said to the mayor, and his tones took on a schoolmasterish severity, "your long absence from Earth has perhaps made you forget those elements of human wisdom that have entered the folk-lore of your native planet. Such as, for example: 'It is folly to kill a goose

that lays golden eggs," and 'Penny wise is pound foolish.'"

"I don't get the connection," objected Johnson.

"Well, by obliging us to pay such a high price for your dinner, you put out of your reach the chance of profiting from a really substantial deal. My partner and I were prepared to make you a sizable offer for the peculiar creature you call Genius. But by reducing our funds the way you have—"

"Who said I wanted to sell him?" the mayor interrupted. He rubbed his fingers together and asked disinterestedly: "What were you going to offer, anyhow?"

"It doesn't matter any longer," Harvey said with elaborate carelessness. "Perhaps you wouldn't have accepted it, anyway."

"That's right," Johnson came back emphatically. "But what would your offer have been which I would have turned down?"

"Which one? The one we were going to make, or the one we can make now?"

"Either one. It don't make no difference. Genius is too valuable to sell."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Johnson. Don't tell me no amount of money would tempt you!"

"Nope. But how much did you say?" "Ah, then you will consider releasing Genius!"

"Well, I'll tell you something," said the mayor confidentially. "When you've got one thing, you've got one thing. But when you've got money, it's the same as having a lot of things. Because, if you've got money, you can buy this and that and this and that and—"

"This and that," concluded Joe. "We'll give you five hundred bucks."

"Now, gents!" Johnson remonstrated. "Why, six hundred would hardly—"

"You haven't left us much money," Harvey put in.

The mayor frowned. "All right, we'll split the difference. Make it five-fifty."

Harvey was quick to pay out, for this was a genuine windfall. Then he stood up and admired the astonishing possession he had so inexpensively acquired.

"I really hate to deprive you of this unique creature," he said to Johnson. "I should imagine you will be rather lonely,

with only your filial mammoth to keep you company."

"I sure will," Johnson confessed glumly. "I got pretty attached to Genius, and I'm going to miss him something awful."

Harvey forcibly removed his eyes from the native, who was clearing off the table almost all at once.

"My friend," he said, "we take your only solace, it is true, but in his place we can offer something no less amazing and instructive."

The mayor's hand went protectively to his pocket. "What is it?" he asked with the suspicion of a man who has seen human nature at its worst and expects nothing better.

"Joseph, get our most prized belonging from the communications room of the ship," Harvey instructed. To Johnson he explained: "You must see the wondrous instrument before its value can be appreciated. My partner will soon have it here for your astonishment."

Joe's face grew as glum as Johnson's had been. "Aw, Harv," he protested, "do we have to sell it? And right when I thought we were getting the key!"

"We must not be selfish, my boy," Harvey said nobly. "We have had our chance; now we must relinquish Fate to the hands of a man who might have more success than we. Go, Joseph. Bring it here."

Unwillingly, Joe turned and shuffled out.

ON a larger and heavier world than Planetoid 42, Johnson's curiosity would probably have had weight and mass. He was bursting with questions, but he was obviously afraid they would cost him money. For his part, Harvey allowed that curiosity to grow like a Venusian amoeba until Joe came in, lugging a radio.

"Is that what you were talking about?" the mayor snorted. "What makes you think I want a radio? I came here to get away from singers and political speech-makers."

"Do not jump to hasty conclusions," Harvey cautioned. "Another word, and I shall refuse you the greatest opportunity any man has ever had, with the sole exceptions of Joseph, myself and the unfortunate inventor of this absolutely awe-inspiring device."

"I ain't in the market for a radio," Johnson said stubbornly.

Harvey nodded in relief. "We have attempted to repay our host, Joseph. He has spurned our generosity. We have now the chance to continue our study, which I am positive will soon reward us with the key to an enormous fortune."

"Well, that's no plating off our bow," Joe grunted. "I'm glad he did turn it down. I hated to give it up after working on it for three whole years."

He picked up the radio and began walking toward the door.

"Now, hold on!" the mayor cried. "I ain't *saying* I'll buy, but what is it I'm turning down?"

Joe returned and set the instrument down on the bar. His face sorrowful, Harvey fondly stroked the scarred plastic cabinet.

"To make a long story, Mr. Johnson," he said, "Joseph and I were among the chosen few who knew the famous Doctor Dean intimately. Just before his tragic death, you will recall, Dean allegedly went insane." He banged his fist on the bar. "I have said it before, and I repeat again, that was a malicious lie, spread by the doctor's enemies to discredit his greatest invention—this fourth dimensional radio!"

"This what?" Johnson blurted out.

"In simple terms," clarified Harvey, "the ingenious doctor discovered that the yawning chasm between the dimensions could be bridged by energy of all quanta. There has never been any question that the inhabitants of the super-dimension would be far more civilized than ourselves. Consequently, the man who could tap their knowledge would find himself in possession of a powerful, undreamt-of science!"

The mayor looked respectfully at the silent box on the bar.

"And this thing gets broadcasts from the fourth dimension?"

"It does, Mr. Johnson! Only charlatans like those who envied Doctor Dean's magnificent accomplishments could deny that fact."

The mayor put his hands in his pockets, unswiveled one hip and stared thoughtfully at the battered cabinet.

"Well, let's say it picks up fourth dimensional broadcasts," he conceded. "But how could you understand what they're

saying? Folks up there wouldn't talk our language."

Again Harvey smashed his fist down. "Do you dare to repeat the scurvy lie that broke Dean's spirit and drove him to suicide?"

Johnson recoiled. "No—no, *of course not*. I mean, being up here, I naturally couldn't get all the details."

"Naturally," Harvey agreed, mollified. "I'm sorry I lost my temper. But it is a matter of record that the doctor proved the broadcasts emanating from the super-dimension were in English! Why should that be so difficult to believe? Is it impossible that at one time there was communication between the dimensions, that the super-beings admired our language and adopted it in all its beauty, adding to it their own hyper-scientific trimmings?"

"Why, I don't know," Johnson said in confusion.

"For three years, Joseph and I lost sleep and hair, trying to detect the simple key that would translate the somewhat metamorphosed broadcasts into our primitive English. It eluded us. Even the doctor failed. But that was understandable; a sensitive soul like his could stand only so much. And the combination of ridicule and failure to solve the mystery caused him to take his own life."

Johnson winced. "Is that what you want to unload on me?"

"For a very good reason, sir. Patience is the virtue that will be rewarded with the key to these fourth dimensional broadcasts. A man who could devote his life to improving this lonely worldlet is obviously a person with unusual patience."

"Yeah," the mayor said grudgingly, "I ain't exactly flighty."

"Therefore, you are the man who could unravel the problem!"

Johnson asked skeptically: "How about a sample first?"

HARVEY turned a knob on the face of the scarred radio. After several squeals of spatial figures, a smooth voice began:

"There are omnious pleajes of moby-hailegs in sonmirand which, howgraismon, are notch to be donfured miss ellasellabell in either or both hagasani paj, by all means. This does not refly, on the brother man, nat

or mizzafil saces are denuded by this ossifaligo . . ."

Harvey switched off the set determinedly.

"Wait a minute!" Johnson begged. "I almost got it then!"

"I dislike being commercial," said Harvey, "but this astounding device still belongs to us. Would we not be foolish to let you discover the clue before purchasing the right to do so?"

The mayor nodded indecisively, looking at the radio with agonized longing. "How much do you want?" he asked unhappily.

"One thousand buckos, and no haggling. I am not in the mood."

Johnson opened his mouth to argue; then, seeing Harvey's set features, paid with the worst possible grace.

"Don't you think we ought to tell him about the batteries, Harv?" Joe asked.

"What about the batteries?" demanded Johnson with deadly calm.

"A very small matter," Harvey said airily. "You see, we have been analyzing these broadcasts for three years. In that time, of course, the batteries are bound to weaken. I estimate these should last not less than one Terrestrial month, at the very least."

"What do I do then?"

Harvey shrugged. "Special batteries are required, which I see Joseph has by chance brought along. For the batteries, the only ones of their kind left in the system, I ask only what they cost—one hundred and ninety-nine buckos, no more and, on the other hand, no less."

Johnson was breathing hard, and his hand hovered dangerously near his gun. But he paid the amount Harvey wanted.

Moreover, he actually shook hands when the two panacea purveyors collected their six-armed prize and said goodbye. Before they were outside, however, he had turned on the radio and was listening tensely to a woman's highly cultured, though rather angry voice, saying:

"Oh, you hannaforge are all beasa-tagasanimort. If you rue amount it, how do you respench a pure woman to ansver gosamak—"

"I'll get it!" they heard Johnson mutter.

Then the sound of giant feet crossing the barroom floor reached their ears, and

a shrill question: "What's that, Papa?"

"A fortune, Jed! Those fakers are damned fools, selling us a thing like—"

Joe gazed at Harvey admiringly. "Another one sold? Harv, that spiel pulls them in like an ether storm!"

Together with the remarkable planetoid man, they reached the ship. Above them, dark, tumbling shapes blotted out the stars and silently moved on. Joe opened the gangway door.

"Come on in, pal," he said to Genius. "We're shoving off."

The planetoid man grinned foolishly. "Can't go along with you," he said with an apologetic manner. "I rike to, but pressure fratten me out if I go."

"What in solar blazes are you talking about?" Harvey asked.

"I grow up on pranetoid," Genius explained. "On big pranet, too much pressure for me."

The two salesmen looked narrowly at each other.

"Did Johnson know that when he sold you?" Joe snarled.

"Oh, sure." The silly grin became wider than ever. "Peopre from Earth buy me rots of times. I never reave pranetoid, though."

"Joseph," Harvey said ominously, "that slick colonist has put one over upon us. What is our customary procedure in that event?"

"We tear him apart," Joe replied between his teeth.

"Not Mister Johnson," advised Genius. "Have gun and badge. He shoot you first and then rock you up in prison."

Harvey paused, his ominous air vanishing. "True. There is also the fact, Joseph, that when he discovers the scrambled rectifier in the radio we sold him, he will have been paid back in full for his regrettable dishonesty."

UNWILLINGLY, Joe agreed. While Genius retreated to a safe distance, they entered the ship and blasted off. Within a few minutes the automatic steering pilot had maneuvered them above the plane of the asteroid belt.

"I got kind of dizzy," Joe said, "there were so many deals back and forth. How much did we make on the sucker?"

"A goodly amount, I wager," Harvey

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories.

"—and don't forget to give all the bloody details that the readers might be interested in hearing about."

Bloody details? Like the time I cut my finger on the sharp edge of the cover of a science-fiction magazine? Because, aside from such accidents and a few tooth-pullings, that's as far as my gore-producing adventures go. Unhappily (like a lot of other writers who find themselves writing an autobiographical sketch at the behest of a hopeful editor) my existence has been almost placid, certainly disappointing from an adventurous standpoint. In a way, though, I am happy about this. I write stories and have my adventures that way. I can only hope that the readers are happy about the situation, too.

I was born February 21, 1913, in Cincinnati, Ohio. But before I explain anything else, let me account for the way the twig was bent: My earliest memories concern my father's workshop, wherein he invented perpetual-motion machines. None of these machines ever worked, by the way. But I always waited in wide-eyed interest. It was only many years later, when, as a result of my admiration of these gadgets, I began to read science-fiction, that I was able to point out to my father the fallacies of his ambition. However, he was a die-hard (as his father was before him) and he never gave up. A peculiar commentary on this is that not so long before my father's death, I was enthusiastically at work, collaborating with him on a perpetual-motion machine myself. I had mathematically proved that the theory was sound. We stayed in this happy state of mind for a long time, while the machine slowly grew. But long before its completion, I doubted my own arithmetic (which never had been my strong point) and busied myself drawing diagrams no one but I understood. Alas, these diagrams conclusively disproved what my mathematics had proved, and humanity was out a cheap source of power.

To get back to a chronological order, at various times in my life I have washed windows, scrubbed floors, tended guinea pigs and furnaces; worked in department stores as flunky, stock boy, supply clerk, assistant purchasing agent; spent some interesting and instructive years at the Evening School of the University of Cincinnati, held the position of assistant editor on an Evening paper.

I have been happily married somewhat over a year, and the girl is a writer herself; which makes it about perfect, doesn't it? Since before the war, we have been to the West Coast, back East again, and have returned to California.

To bring this up to date, at present we stand alone in the swollen city of Los Angeles, with virtually no permanent address, watching defense workers rush in from every direction. There is a stir in the air, a controlled excitement: Uncle Sam is rolling up his sleeves; and the date of the knock-out punch, we feel, is the only uncertainty.

ROSS ROCKLYNNE

responded. He took out a pencil and paper. "Medicine, 469.50; radio, 1,000; batteries, 199. Total—let's see—1668 buckos and 50 redsents. A goodly sum, as I told you."

He emptied his pockets of money, spread it out on the astrogration table and began counting. Finished, he looked up, troubled.

"How much did we have when we landed, Joseph?"

Exactly 1668 buckos," Joe answered promptly.

"I can't understand it," said Harvey. "Instead of double our capital, we now have only 1668 buckos and 50 redsents!"

Feverishly, he returned to his pencil and paper.

"Drinking water, 790; battery water, free; meal, 328; planetoid man, 550. Total: 1668 buckos!" He stared at the figures. "We paid out almost as much as we took in," he said bitterly. "Despite our intensive efforts, we made the absurd sum of fifty redsents."

"Why, the dirty crook!" Joe growled.

But after a few moments of sad reflection, Harvey became philosophical. "Perhaps, Joseph, we are more fortunate than we realize. We were, after all, completely in Johnson's power. The more I ponder, the more I believe we were lucky to escape. And, anyhow, we did make fifty redsents on the swindler. A moral victory, my boy."

Joe, who had been sunk desparingly into a chair, now stood up slowly and asked: "Remember that bottle-opener we gave him?"

"Certainly," Harvey explained. "What about it?"

"How much did it cost us?"

Harvey's eyebrows puckered. Suddenly he started laughing. "You're right, Joseph. We paid forty-six redsents for it on Venus. So, after all that transacting of business, we made four redsents!"

"Four redsents, hell!" Joe snapped. "That was the sales tax!"

He glared; then a smile lifted his mouth. "You remember those yokels on Mars' Flatlands, and the way they worshipped gold?"

"Goldbricks!" Harvey said succinctly.

Grinning, Joe set the robot-controls for Mars.

Menace of the Mists

By RICHARD STOREY

A nameless horror poured from the sea-bottoms of Venus, driven by a soulless intelligence that could not be beaten. Four Earthmen stood in the way of the voracious horde, knowing they could not escape—but swearing they would not admit defeat.

Illustration by Doolin



MACALOON rose in the stirrups of his saddle-lizard. His guide, a Venusian fishman, trembled nervously at the mount's side and pointed

straight ahead. MacAlloon followed the direction of the quivering four-jointed, scaly arm.

"See, bossmac?" the reptilian native

hissed in fright. "Bosslimpy speak truth. Cen'pedes ready to march. Soon they attack us. Then is all over."

On the other lizard, little Al Birchall tried to peer through the bright white fog of Venus. It was like attempting to gaze through a bedsheet.

MacAloon lifted a pair of infra-red binoculars to his eyes. Instantly, the glasses dispelled the blinding mist.

"See anything, Mac?" Birchall asked.

Mac stared ahead without answering. Before him lay the black, motionless ocean which covered all the planet except a few hundred large islands. At the shore he saw movement, an enormous inky wave that flowed ponderously up over the land and steadily inched forward.

Countless thousands of foot-long creatures were swarming out of the water and falling into dense marching ranks. The beasts, like huge centipedes, each had dozens of swift legs. The front half was legless, though, and looked like the human part of a centaur. It wasn't only the posture that made the resemblance. They had round heads, shaped like skulls, with deadly manibles; and clever arms and hands grew out of their shoulders.

Centaurpedes—even more than the heat, the mud and the fog, they were man's most murderous enemy on Venus.

Silently, Mac handed the binoculars to Al Birchall.

"Bossmac," the fishman pleaded, "we go 'way, not fight cen'pedes? They kill and eat us; nothing we can do."

Mac watched Al lower the glasses from his eyes. He did it very slowly at first, then grinned when he caught Mac's gaze, and flipped the binoculars across.

"They sure look dangerous," he said.

"They are," Mac answered quietly. "They can strip the flesh off our bones in three minutes flat."

Below them, between the tall bulk of the two mounts, the fishman's long, flat head turned from Mac's face to Al's.

"Bossal, tell bossmac we not able fight cen'pedes," he begged sibilantly. "They come—" The thin, scaled hands waved excitedly, "like biggest army you ever see, make war on mine. You kill and kill, more come. Please, we go to man city!"

MacAloon jerked his lizard's reins around in the direction of the mine. Al's

mount came alongside. The fishman groaned, then began trotting before them on swift webbed feet. They splashed over the eternal mud, through the ever-present white fog.

Should they give up the fight against the shrewd, heartbreakingly persistent vermin? If they did, they would have to abandon the mine which had become their life-work. They would have to blow up the place before retreating.

For all life on Venus was amphibious, but centauredes were deliberately trying to quit the water, knowing their semi-civilization could reach its mechanistic goal only on land.

Unable to prop the porous native rock with the brittle, primitive plastics they used instead of metals, they were striving to take over an iron mine that had already been started by human engineers. Then, with the metal they could produce, they would make tools and raise cities . . . and manufacture weapons with which to push men clear off the planet.

Their forays had forced a number of mines out of existence. Two years ago, before Al Birchall became the fourth partner here, an undersea colony of 'pedes swarmed down on this place. Surrounded on all sides, the men had put up a long, bitter fight. If Adonis City, half around the globe, hadn't finally sent a rocket ship, they would have been lost.

In the rocket, Mac had tried flame-strafig with the bow jets, swooping back and forth across the black mass of besiegers. But the wily animals merely dug deep in the mud and waited till he passed overhead, then continued the attack. Since he couldn't be everywhere at once, part of the army was always surging forward. At best, the strafing only slowed down the assault.

But then Limpy Austin, up in the lookout tower, sighted foraging parties in the rear, dragging up food supplies in the form of gigantic dead meat-eaters. Mac had rocketed over the rear of the army, burning the food into useless charred fragments. Starving, the attackers were at last forced to retreat to their ocean city, but only until they could figure out new strategy.

Mac said, "We'll stick."

Otherwise, he knew, he'd have to go

back to ferrying fruit boats between South America and Antarctica. Birchall would revert to his old confidence games all over the System. Swede Steffansen would have to manipulate a freight crane on Mercury again. And Limpy Austin—well, there wasn't much a semi-cripple could do, outside of being lookout and radio operator for his friends.

THE two riders approached the mine enclosure which struggled into visibility through the smothering haze. The fishman, fleetier than the lumbering saddle-lizards, had already reached the high wire fence. He gestured wildly at the guard nearest him, an alert armed Venusian who stood on a stilt-platform that overlooked the fence to the mud flats beyond.

The guard pressed a button that opened a gate in the wire barricade. The mounted men pounded through, and over the wide muddy stretch to the concrete wall.

Deeply embedded in the ooze, with the rock bed for a foundation, the wall paralleled the outer fence and closed in the entire mining grounds. Its polished outer face was deeply indented, like a sharply curved concave lens. No joints showed in the smooth surface.

But Limpy Austin, up in the glass-walled lookout room atop the stilt blockade house, saw them. He opened a tightly fitting door in the concrete rampart. They rode through into the compound, dismounted near the closed-cabin freight tractor that stood beside the smelter.

"The 'pedes are coming, aren't they?" asked a slow, heavy voice behind them. Swede Steffansen came around the lizards. He was a big, placid man, but his sky-blue eyes—blue as the heaven of Earth, not this white hell—were troubled now. He said: "I could tell by the way the pack animals are acting. They're touchy."

"They caught the scent," Mac answered. "The attack's due in about two hours. Let all the animals out. We don't want them stampeding during the battle."

Swede nodded, slogged off toward the corral.

"Tell the fishmen we're in for a fight with 'pedes," Mac ordered Birchall. "Weed out the weak sisters. They'd only get in our way, anyhow."

Stepping high to avoid splashing, Al

bounded off in the direction of the tippie at the mine entry. MacAloon went into the blockade house and climbed to the lookout room.

Limpy Austin was standing at the infra-red glass wall. His left arm and leg were shriveled, and one side of his face was twisted up in a sardonic leer. Mercurian Paralysis, that strange disease which immobilizes either half of a person depending on whether it is contracted at the Day or Night Side, had made a hopeless cripple of him.

He turned around when Mac came in. "Well?" he asked.

"They're coming, all right," Mac grunted. He leaned over the control panel, pushed the button that clanged the cease-work alarm down in the mine. Then he threw the lever that halted the ore cars to bring the men to the surface.

"How do things look?" Limpy pursued. Mac shrugged. "We ought to have a better chance than before. There are four of us this time."

Limpy shuffled to the radio. With his slender, sensitive right hand, he twisted the dials.

"Adonis City," he said harshly into the microphone. "Limpy Austin calling Adonis City . . ."

There was a squeal of static. "Adonis City," replied a harried voice. "Come in, Austin, but make it short!"

"What's up?"

"'Pede attack on every damned mine. How about you? Aren't they—"

"Yeah," Limpy cut in. "That's why I'm calling. Send over a ship. Ours is wrecked."

The weary voice cursed. "I can't, Austin. We figured you had a boat, so we shipped them all to the other mines."

"Okay," Limpy shrugged. "Then we'll have to do without."

"Why don't you guys blow up the place and leave?"

"Maybe we'll have to. I don't know. When you get a chance—"

"Yeah," the man replied hastily. "The first ship that comes in, you guys get. So long, and good luck!"

Limpy switched off and glanced inquiringly at Mac, his paralyzed grin a slash of seemingly pure evil.

"Looks bad, Mac."

"Maybe," MacAloon said curtly. "If we can hold out till they give us a boat, we'll come through all right."

Nevertheless, he frowned, worried by the simultaneous attacks. There was something ominous behind them—and he didn't know what.

LIMPY was sullen; the more the right side of his face drew down in anger, the more sardonically leered the frozen left side. Swede's placid features showed no emotion, but his clenched fists did. Mac alone tried to appear cheerful, though his mind was furiously analyzing their grave situation. While Birchall said nothing, peering absently into space.

Silently, the men pulled on steel-soled shoes, lead-fiber gloves and infra-red goggles. On their backs they strapped compact battery-radios with short antennae, a fixed microphone at the chest. The loud-speaker atop each small set, at neck level, could be heard in anything short of a vacuum or explosion. Then the defenders armed themselves with flame-throwers and machine guns that shot steel-piercing bomb bullets.

Straightening, Mac asked: "How many fishermen are staying?"

"Twenty-one," snarled Birchall.

Mac grinned wryly. "Cheer up, Al. That's better than I figured on." He turned. "Limpy, stay up at lookout. Warn me when the 'pedes are getting close. Swede, you and Al set up ammunition dumps in the compound. Then make sure the explosives and contacts will work fast if we have to blow up the place in a hurry."

While the others dispersed, Mac gathered a squad of fishermen, armed with flame-throwers and led them outside the high fence. Methodically, they burned down all vegetation for a distance of several hundred yards, to prevent the centaurpedes from creeping up close under cover.

When Mac and his detachment were returning, Limpy opened a sluice from the central control tower. Oil poured into the shallow water-filled moat that ringed the wire barrier. A thick, greasy film spread over the water.

Meanwhile, the rest of the fishermen had been deployed around the inside of the fence. They stood nervously holding their

flame-throwers, their membrane-covered eyes bulging anxiously. Up on the stilt towers, the best native marksmen pressed their quivering scaled shoulders against the stocks of mounted machine-guns.

Mac felt a pang of gratitude. He knew what their decision to stay had meant. All life on Venus dreaded the centaurpede with a blind, wild terror.

"Hey!" Limpy's voice grated through the radio. "Come up to the lookout room!"

MacAloon rushed through the mud and climbed to the glass-walled chamber. He glanced questioningly at Limpy. The lookout man wordlessly handed him a pair of binoculars and pointed to the coast.

Swede and Al burst in, as usual, asked no questions. But Birchall was babbling at a terrific rate.

"Shut up!" Limpy said tensely.

Mac stared at the ocean. His jaw muscles suddenly bunched into hard knots. At wide intervals, six black waves were lapping over the shore and rolling down on the mine like a flood—a deluge with gigantic mandibles and fiendish cunning, a torrent miles long and spread far over the muddy plain.

"That's never happened before," Limpy whispered. "It was always one colony to a mine."

Swede and Al took turns at the binoculars. No change came over Swede's face. Birchall's, though, contracted in horror.

"They got together!" he yapped. "We're done for, Mac! We can't fight six colonies all at once, and without a boat!"

Scowling, Mac jammed his hands into his pockets. "They're using holding attacks on the other mines to tie up help from Adonis City. Meanwhile, they're concentrating their main force here."

"Smart little devils," rumbled Swede.

"We ought to quit!" Al chattered. "We can't lick them!"

His face whiter and more contorted than ever, Limpy said: "Why don't you guys beat it?"

Mac's head jerked up sharply. Swede looked at Limpy in mild surprise. Al Birchall's chin dropped.

"What do you mean—us guys?" Al demanded. "What about you?"

Both sides of Limpy's face grinned sardonically. "No boat, all the animals

set free—you'll have to run for it. And me? Well, I'm not much good at running. But you three can escape, if I'm not along to hold you back."

"I'm a heel," snarled Birchall. "Forget what I said."

"Sure, Limpy," Swede added with clumsy joviality. "This little ape is always talking before he thinks. We're sticking—all of us."

"Cut it out!" snapped Limpy. "Somebody has to stay here to throw the dynamite switch. I don't need any help."

"Nobody's throwing any switch," Mac declared. "This is our mine, and no damned vermin are taking it over!"

"But you'll never beat them," pleaded Limpy. "And even if you did, they'd only keep coming back until they got the place. You can't wipe them out once and for all."

"Someday, somebody will," Mac said. "In the meantime, we can fight like hell. 'Pedes haven't any more intelligence than a bee, but even they get tired of being slaughtered."

"A bee?" Al asked. "I thought 'pedes were smart devils."

"Not individually, according to Graves, the old-time biologist."

"Then how can they plan and act all together?"

"They have some way of coordinating, Graves claimed. How does a beehive act as a unit? We don't know, but it does just the same."

"Can't I talk you fellows into leaving?" begged Limpy.

"No!" Al stated flatly.

Limpy shrugged. Shuffling over to the window, he pointed down at the closed-cabin tractor beside the smelter.

"Then how about letting me use that as a tank?" he asked. "I'm not much good here, anyhow. The 'pedes wouldn't be able to get at me, inside the cabin, and I could crush and burn them down till they quit."

"That was tried once at a mine," said Mac. "The 'pedes dug tank traps. The driver killed himself after being stuck in one for a week. It didn't matter; he'd have died soon enough. But even when he skipped the traps, the 'pedes dodged the treads. They don't just stand around and wait to be crushed."

The right side of Limpy's face drew down in disappointment. "You guys are suckers to stick around. I'm just a rubber cog."

"Rubber cog, huh?" Al yelped. "How do you think we're going to fight without a lookout man?"

"Don't talk like a sap, Limpy," added Mac with gruff gentleness. "We need you a lot more than you need us."

A slow, sad smile spread over Limpy's twisted features.

"Okay, if that's how you feel about it."

"That's how we feel about it," Swede answered.

They went down to their stations within the enclosure. In deadly silence, the camp waited for the first blow.

IT came when the tension was almost unbearable. Through his infra-red goggles, MacAloon could see a vast, dark smear, advancing inexorably, like the ominous march of a black glacier. Before the ordered ranks came the expected stampede of animals.

As if they had studied the break-through tactics of the extinct Nazis, the 'pedes were driving huge beasts ahead of them, living tanks that were meant to smash down the mine's fortifications. Enormous meat-eaters were thundering along on vast legs, crushing smaller carnivores in their frenzied flight. Fleet, timid vegetarians raced beside their killers, but neither thought of anything except the hideously lethal creatures close behind them.

When the animals were close to the fence, Mac snapped an order into his microphone. Instantly, flame-throwers spat at the pool of oil surrounding the mine. A fierce blaze sprang up.

The demented rabble scattered right and left—all but the meat-eaters, the biggest beasts on Venus. Too stupid to fear fire, they were the greatest danger. In idiot terror, they crashed toward the fence.

Somehow, the fishmen stood their ground. Mac knew how they felt. It was a sensation of unnerving horror to watch a gigantic animal plunging toward you, to stare at the enormous fangs in the slaving yard-wide mouth, to feel the ground trembling beneath their tremendous feet. . . .

MacAloon opened fire. From every side

of the camp, he heard answering blasts. The pounding of the machine-guns made a furious clatter. Bullets exploded savagely in the great bodies. Then horrible bellows of agony drowned every other sound.

For minutes after a man managed to pump an endless burst of slugs into a meat-eater, and saw the flesh erupt in bloody blobs, he couldn't help shaking, though he knew the monster was already dead on its feet. Then the vast beast collapsed into the mud with a deafening splash, and he wondered if he could ever forget the terrifying sight.

When the thick, oily smoke thinned out, the smaller animals had fled into the fog. Mac sent out a squadron of fishermen, who destroyed the dying meat-eaters. If the bodies had been allowed to remain, the 'pedes would have used them as a food supply.

The fishermen came back inside, and all the fog-wrapped world was silent. On noiseless feet, the oncoming army moved with impossible precision toward the camp.

Twenty-five defenders against uncoun- ted millions, with only a web of wiring and a concrete wall between them and the jaws of doom. And even if they won, victory would be no more than a truce. . . .

THE six armies of centauredes met and fused. Narrower and narrower grew the gap between the mine and the unending wave of repulsive vermin. Then, when they were almost at the fence, the main army suddenly slowed down, and the two wings broke into double-swift march, advancing on both sides of the barrier.

"Turn on the juice!" Mac snapped into his microphone.

Abruptly, the fence began shooting off big blue sparks in the wet air. The main body of centauredes halted a few yards away and remained impassive. Inside, the fishermen stood frozen, staring in terror at the long, multi-legged animals, the round, intelligent-looking heads, the huge mandibles, and the upright shoulders with pairs of clever hands and arms.

Behind the camp, the encircling wings met and joined. More advanced until the surrounding army was uniform in depth. Then, with a single movement, the black

cataract flooded straight at the wire fence.

"Hold your fire!" Mac yelled at his fishermen.

Around the compound, he heard Swede and Al shouting the same order. But it was too much to expect of fear-tightened native nerves. Spasmodic bursts of fire spurted out. Undaunted, the horde pressed on against the fence.

Crackling and flashing, the electrified wire suddenly flung out great streamers of sparks. The moist chitinous bodies shriveled into ashes. A stink of burned flesh polluted the heavy fog.

Apparently at an inaudible signal, the entire mass of 'pedes fell back out of danger. MacAloon was awed. He knew that the rear of a human army, unable to see what was happening up front, would keep pushing forward. But a secret knowledge, impossible to men, made the centauredes act as a single entity.

Looking along the fence, Mac could see detachments of 'pede scouts, moving warily toward the sparking barrier. While the army watched, the reconnoiterers experimentally touched the wire. A flash and they were destroyed, but not before serving their purpose. They had given the army a chance to analyze the fence's properties.

Again the entire force moved forward, this time with more caution than before. MacAloon looked on anxiously, knowing they were aware of the danger.

"Mac!" cried Al's voice. "What're they going to do?"

"They're too smart to keep electrocuting themselves," said MacAloon tersely. "They must have a plan."

"But what is it?"

"I don't know," Mac admitted.

The first ten lines halted within a foot of the flashing barricade. The next nine marched forward and mounted the backs of the first lines. Then each succeeding rank climbed those in front.

"A pyramid!" Al yapped.

The fishermen gaped up at Mac, then back at the 'pedes. They were close to cracking.

"Wait!" Mac ordered. "Wait till boss-limpy says they're almost to the top of the fence. Then fire low. Don't keep firing after the pyramid falls!"

The sporadic firing ceased. Immense

gaps had appeared in the pyramid, but the fence had heated red. The drain on the generators would be enormous, and this MacAloon had feared more than the few invaders that might drop across.

Swiftly, the pyramid grew until it was as high as the fence. Then, up in the lookout room, Limpy barked a signal.

Flame leaped out at the lowest line of 'pedes, slashed back and forth. All in an instant, the pyramid collapsed. The centauredes retreated, leaving a ring of charred bodies around the fence. But the survivors were as numberless as ever.

In the sudden silence, agonized shrieks rang out across the compound.

What's wrong, Limpy?" demanded MacAloon.

"It's Al, but I can't see what happened!"

"Stay where you are, Swede!" Mac ordered. "Keep the fishmen fighting!"

He raced to Birchall's station, saw that Al's flame-thrower had jammed. Hundreds of centauredes had hurled themselves over the fence and surrounded two natives. Others had brought up a tree trunk and hammered a big hole in the wire. Through the gap, a full regiment was pouring into the enclosure.

"Take care of the ones inside!" Al shrieked. "I'll stop them!"

"Don't be a fool!" shouted Mac. "Fall back and get another flame-thrower!"

Unheeding, Al smashed a path to the fence with the butt of his weapon. 'Pedes were already climbing up his body and wasting no time. He bit his lip and charged on. The trickle of blood running down his chin was the smallest one flowing from his torn flesh. In a last desperate lunge, he grabbed the ends of the broken fence.

"Al!" Mac cried out.

He was too late. A sheet of blue flame had sprung up. There was a piercing scream of pain beyond endurance. Then Birchall hung limply, caught, as he had intended, by the jagged ends of wire. His mangled, lifeless body, through which the current flowed, had closed the gap.

A sudden film spoiled Mac's vision. Savagely, he blinked it away. With vicious fury, he burned down the swiftly crawling centauredes around him. The

two fishmen, no longer surrounded, shuddered free of their fright and began to help. Under the fierce heat, all the animals in the enclosure curled and died.

Murderously calm, Mac fired a steady blast through the fence at the pyramid outside. Sizzling and frying, the formation fell to the ground.

In spite of that, the 'pedes had won this battle. They had unleashed a new weapon while the defenders had turned to watch the struggle. A rain of vermin seemed to come from the sky. For, thrust deep into the mud outside the fence, were whip-like catapults. Ten animals were drawing back each slingshot, flinging a 'pede into the enclosure!

Dismayed, MacAloon watched them hurtle over the wire in unbelievable numbers. Shooting wildly at them, yet fixed to the ground they were defending, the fishmen were desperately near panic.

"Stop firing!" Mac shouted.

His order was ignored. He cursed and pulled half of the natives away, giving their flame-throwers to the remaining guards. The first half he sent inside the compound with snapped instructions. The others he placed just before the concrete rampart. Armed with two weapons instead of one, each fishmen had double firing power.

"Let them reform their ranks inside the camp," Mac ordered. "Then let them have it!"

Limpy communicated the command to Swede on the other side of the compound. The haphazard blasts stopped. Undisturbed now, the centauredes well into military formation, as Mac had expected. When their lines were twenty deep, they advanced, a black, tight unit with champion mandibles.

"Now!" MacAloon roared.

A withering wall of flame lashed out, burning down the invaders by the hundreds. But reinforcements kept flying over the blue-flashing fence. And under cover of the air invasion, the pyramids were being built again! The fishmen, backed up against the curved concrete barricade, were unable to reach this new threat with a stream of fire.

Obedying his previous instructions, a squad of fishmen came staggering through the doors in the wall. They dragged oxy-

gen and hydrogen tanks that were connected in pairs by flexible, insulated hoses with triggered nozzles.

"Forward!" Mac commanded.

Limpy passed the word around the besieged mine, and fishmen advanced with blazing flame-throwers. Behind them, the reserves hauled up the tanks. Slowly, stubbornly, the tide of centaurpedes was driven back into the fence. An ear-splitting crackle, and they were gone, a smoking pile of cinders.

Even after the camp was clear, Mac did not rest. He drove the reserves to the fence and kept them firing at the enemy beyond.

"Not the 'pedes!" he shouted. They looked up, bewildered, wondering why ammunition should be used, if not to burn down the foe. "Melt the catapults!" he ordered.

The natives understood at last that the hand-weapons were too feeble to reduce the crude plastic slingshots, but that the tank flame-throwers were not. They blasted out at the catapults.

But the centaurpedes were damnably shrewd. In half the time it had taken the fishmen to comprehend, the vermin had begun pulling up their slingshots and retreating out of range.

Harrying his forces to get the catapults, Mac glanced aside and swore viciously. In the gaps between his widely spaced crew, more pyramids were forming.

"Forget the slingshots!" he yelled. "They can wait till later!"

The revised order didn't make sense to the fishmen. They couldn't see that, while their attention was diverted, the main army could pour over the fence on a secure pyramid. They blasted away at the slingshots and ignored the wall of 'pedes.

The deadly animals saw their chance and acted. With quick cunning, they sent over a torrent of invaders. Chattering in fear, the fishmen switched their attack to the pyramids, but they were too late. They were being driven back by the vermin inside the fence, and more and more were coming over.

"I can't hold them, Mac," came Swede's unalarmed voice.

"I can't either," Mac said tensely. "Get the fishmen and fuel tanks into the compound."

Shrill screams erupted from the natives. Faced by alert, precise ranks marching toward them, they threw down their weapons and rushed for the concrete wall.

MAC ran forward, cursing. He grabbed an oxy tank and pulled it to safety. Most of the thrower fuel was safe in the camp, but the tanks outside would be badly needed if the attack continued in force. But regiments of 'pedes had bypassed the ammunition and posted guards to prevent their being rescued.

Hard-faced, Mac ordered a fishman to go out into the enclosure with him. While Mac kept back the horde with a hail of fire, the shivering native pulled a tank into the compound. Mac increased the size of the raiding parties. Again and again they sallied out, until the bulk of the abandoned fuel was saved.

Sweating, Mac signaled to Limpy in the blockade house. The hermetic doors in the wall slid shut. The natives stood on the ledge on the inner side of the rampart, watching with horror-filled eyes as the fiendish beasts tried to scale the concave surface.

Mac called Swede by radio, then trudged through the mud to the blockade house. The three men met in the lookout room.

Seeing Swede, Mac realized for the first time how dirty, wet and exhausted he was himself. They were both blackened with mud and flame blasts, their clothing grimy and sopping.

Limpy's good eye was harrowed, the frozen side of his face contorted in an evil grin.

"Poor Al," muttered Swede. He sank down ponderously on a chair. "He was a game little fellow. I'll miss him."

Without replying, Limpy turned around. He stared sightlessly through the infrared windows at the white fog and the eternal mud, the seething mass of centaurpedes and the shaking, gabbling fishmen. All around the mine, seeming to reach every horizon, stretched the completely encircling army of vermin. But that was not what Limpy was seeing.

Mac came over to the window. "I saw Al die, too," he said in a harshly gentle voice. "If I have to kick off that way, I hope I'll be as brave as he was."

"Maybe you'll get your chance sooner

than you think," Limpy snarled. "Six armies against us, one dead, our boat no good, the fence useless, the fishermen demoralized—" He whirled. "What are we waiting for? Why don't we blow up the place and quit?"

"Because we still have a chance," Mac answered. "They've taken our first line of defense, but we still have the second."

"The wall?" Swede grunted. "Think that'll stop them long?"

"Long enough," promised Mac. "It's thirty times as high as they are, and three feet out of plumb-line with the bottom. Before they figure out how to get across, maybe Adonis City'll be able to send us a rocket. Get them on the radio, anyhow, Limpy. We're carrying the whole weight of the attack. They've got to give us a ship."

Limpy shuffled to the panel. He set the dials, then spoke mechanically into the microphone: "Adonis City. Limpy Austin calling Adonis City. . . ." Several minutes went by. He looked up. "They don't answer."

"Keep trying," Mac said. "Everybody must be calling them from all the other mines."

"That's what I mean," Swede put in earnestly. "We fight; the other mines fight. Sometimes we win; sometimes the 'pedes do. Whatever happens, it's never finished. We spoil their old tricks, so they figure out new ones. They're devils, Mac. We can never lick them for good."

"Someday, somebody will," Mac said stubbornly.

He gripped the sill and stared out through the infra-red glass. In the outer compound was a black fester of centauredes, crawling like gigantic lice before the concrete barricade.

"Nothing can stop them," Swede said beside him. "They'll find a way of getting over. They always do. And then—"

Mac's skin began to creep. To be eaten, the flesh stripped off your bones while you're alive and screaming. . . . The fence had halted them, and they'd built pyramids. When flame-throwers cut down the pyramids, they used catapults. Now the wall was holding them back, but they'd work out some method of hurtling over.

Then those armored bodies would push back the defenders until they could retreat

no farther. Before those steel-hard mandibles, one man after another would go down, a living skeleton, covered with black, crawling vermin. . . .

Mac shuddered. "As long as that wall holds them," he said, "it isn't hopeless. But the sooner the boat gets here, the better off we'll be. Are you trying Adonis City, Limpy?"

"All over the dial!" Limpy groaned. "They don't answer!"

Swede shook his head. "The fishermen know what the odds are. Look at that."

Mac saw three natives fling up their arms, claw over the wall and throw themselves into the 'pedes' jaws. They fought to their feet and raced toward the fence, but their fleetness didn't save them. Long before they reached the wire, they were black and shapeless, covered from head to foot with clinging, rending animals.

"The fence," Swede explained quietly. "That's why they went crazy."

FAR to the right, a corps of centaur-pede engineers had hauled up the huge tree trunk. Using it as a battering ram again, they smashed down a section of the barrier. Now they were rushing in, tearing the chargeless fence to pieces. As the two men watched tensely, another section collapsed with a splash into the mud. Instantly, the 'pedes began moving it toward the concrete wall.

"I knew they'd find a way," said Swede. "They're going to use the fence segments as ladders." He turned away.

Mac, continuing to stare down, suddenly stiffened. The 'pedes were acting queerly, moving around sluggishly, as if they had lost interest in their task! He frowned and faced his companions.

"That's funny," he muttered. "They're stopping—they seem confused."

Limpy shrugged and went on twirling the dials. Swede glanced out, then looked at Mac with upraised eyebrows.

"They look the same to me," he said slowly. "You seeing things, Mac?"

Startled, MacAloon shot his gaze back to the scene below. Swede was right! The 'pedes had resumed their work! Mac stood still for a moment, his mind racing swiftly, trying to grasp the significance of that momentary halt. Then he whirled, facing Limpy.

"What were you doing just a moment ago?"

Limpy raised his head from the dials. "Trying all the wave lengths. Adonis City isn't on its usual—"

"I thought so!" Mac yelled triumphantly. "Get back to the length you had before!"

"But there wasn't any answer."

"They're halfway to the wall," Swede muttered abstractedly.

"Get that wave length again!" Mac snapped.

Limpy's right shoulder shrugged. He twisted the dial gently while MacAloon turned back to the window and stared out tensely.

"Hold it!" he suddenly ordered. "Don't touch those dials!"

Swede and Limpy looked at him puzzledly. He pointed down at the swarming enclosure. Limpy shuffled over to him, followed the direction of his finger.

"They've dropped the fence," whispered the lookout. "They don't seem to know what they're doing."

"Yah," Swede said in an awed voice.

Below, the centaурpedes were moving about aimlessly, as if they had forgotten their orders. They had completely lost their terrible machine-like precision!

"I don't get it," Swede complained in bewilderment. "What's wrong with them?"

Mac's grin was hard and tight. "They're directed by a central brain, a sort of queen 'pede which coordinates their actions by ultra-short-wave commands, the way a queen bee directs a beehive. That's the secret of their synchronization!"

"And I was working the ultra-short—" Limpy stopped, stunned.

"That's the idea," Mac nodded. "Our signals blanket theirs! They can't get orders from the main intelligence, so they don't know what to do!"

For a moment, the men were silent. Slowly, then, Swede said: "Now all we have to do is kill the brain."

"Yeah," Limpy agreed bitterly. "What a chance of getting through! Where's the queen 'pede, or the brain, or whatever it is?"

Mac squinted through a pair of binoculars. He gazed along that meandering tangle of disorganized vermin. Abruptly, he halted. A mile beyond the ravaged fence was a small patch of integrated activ-

ity, a regiment of centaурpedes that still functioned in unison.

"There's the truth," he muttered. "Or more likely, there are six of them, one from each undersea colony. They probably formed a council of war to attack us. That's why we almost lost."

"Almost?" Swede echoed. "But we can't fight them now!"

Mac shook his head. "We won't lose," he said grimly. "I'm going to kill the council of war."

"You're crazy!" Limpy cried. "You'd have to run through a mile of mud and 'pedes. Brain or no brain to direct them, they'll pull you down instinctively. Mac, you won't have a chance!"

MacAloon looked out at the wandering army. "I think I will," he said. He went to the door. "They won't attack together. Open the wall, Limpy. Don't mind if a few 'pedes get through. You can take care of them. Just keep that ultra-short-wave blanket clamped down over their minds. So long."

HE ran down the metal steps and across the mud toward the smelter. Tearing open the door of the closed-cabin tractor, he jumped inside and slammed the port shut. He started the motor, drove past the blockade house. Swede and Limpy were at the window. Mac waved.

A door in the wall swung wide for him. He toolled through, the door closed and he was among the centaурpedes. Infinitely disgusting things, a few individuals attacked the tractor in blind rage, clamping their mandibles on the steel parts and clinging senselessly. Others gaped up in blank wonder as the machine bore down on them. He heard them *crack* and *squish* beneath the threads.

He drove straight at the fence. It went down and he was out of the enclosure, entirely surrounded by vermin. On all sides, farther than he could see, were purposeless animals, no longer in orderly ranks, obeying a single dictate. How long would they remain severed from the controlling brains?

Desperately, Mac fixed in his mind the position of the place where he had seen unified activity. He headed directly for the war council of intelligent centaурpedes.

The treads of his tractors made sucking,

splashing sounds through the mud. 'Pedes, not bright enough by themselves to get out of the way of danger, died by the thousands under the grinding chains.

He was drawing closer, into the thickest cluster of all. The vermin here were also wandering around, but they seemed to be trying to make up their minds. Mac knew the blanketing wave was weaker here, that the council of queens 'pedes was struggling to get its nearer minions under control again. Before that happened, they had to be destroyed.

But where were they? Two hundred yards away was a great battle square of centauredes, setting themselves with idiot bravery to stop his invincible machine. Mandibles opened wide, they crouched back, ready to spring and rend the indestructible steel.

Were the 'pede dictators in the center of that battalion? Theoretically, they should be, but Mac knew better than to expect the obvious. Were they brain-like, slug-like, or did they hide their vast significance behind protective disguises of mediocrity, pretending to be nothing but ordinary centauredes?

The tractor lumbered on across the mud, smashed into that wall of nauseating bodies. The cracking and squashing made his stomach heave, yet he kept grinding ahead.

"Damn your murdering hearts, where are you?" he bit out.

He crashed through the battalion, started to turn back for another charge. Instead, he clamped his teeth together and continued savagely. Far before him, he had seen several 'pedes, identical with the rest, racing in different directions toward the ocean. They had set up a rear guard to cover their retreat.

He wrenched the wheel aside. *Crack!* "One!" he gloated.

Another was scampering furiously twenty feet ahead. He drove down on it, exulted when he heard the treads crush the hard chitinous shell.

"Two!"

"Three!"

The revolting beasts were fleet, but the tractor was swifter. One after another, he ran them down, his lips twisting

in a fierce grin each time he heard one squash beneath his treads.

At last, two miles from camp, he stopped. He had destroyed the last 'pede trying to escape to the ocean. But had he killed the brains that had directed this gigantic assault on the mine?

HE pivoted and started back to the compound. The 'pedes were still ambling around, following their single purposes. He could never have got through if the ultra-short wave hadn't actually blanketed the brains' commands. But were the animals merely disorganized only as long as the broadcast continued, or had their rulers really been killed?

Mac reached the mine. Limpy opened a gate in the concrete wall, and he drove through. A moment later, he was in the lookout wall, standing beside his two partners, gazing out the window.

"Did you get them?" Limpy asked breathlessly.

Mac leaned forward and watched with intent eyes. Slowly, like brainless creatures gradually coming to a decision, the endless mob of centauredes began moving away. They didn't march, as they had advanced to the attack. They wandered off in the general direction of the sea from which they had sprung.

"I got them," Mac said. He straightened and turned around wearily. "Get in touch with Adonis City, Limpy. Give them the wave length that blankets the queen 'pedes' instructions. Tell them to relay the information to mines that are under siege."

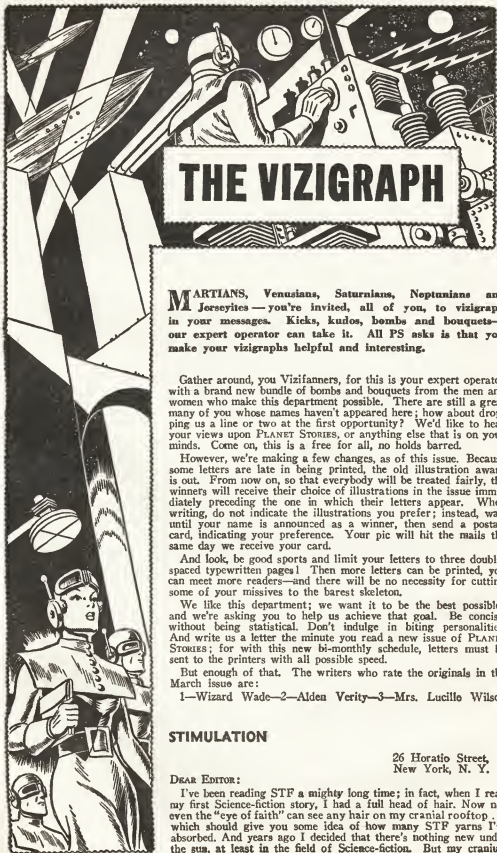
"We've won?" asked Swede incredulously.

"Yes," Mac replied. "And this time it's for good. We'll be able to beat off every attack from now on. Only, I don't think they'll go on fighting much longer. They'll have to quit."

Swede sat down ponderously. "I'm glad, Mac. Not for us; for Al. He didn't die uselessly."

"No," Mac said. "He didn't."

Fumbling with the radio dials, Limpy grinned. None but his close friends could know that grief made his grin wider and more evil-looking than ever.



THE VIZIGRAPH

MARTIANS, Venusians, Saturnians, Neptunians and Jerseyites—you're invited, all of you, to vizigraph in your messages. Kicks, kudos, bombs and bouquets—our expert operator can take it. All PS asks is that you make your vizigraphs helpful and interesting.

Gather around, you Vizifanners, for this is your expert operator with a brand new bundle of bombs and bouquets from the men and women who make this department possible. There are still a great many of you whose names haven't appeared here; how about dropping us a line or two at the first opportunity? We'd like to hear your views upon *PLANET STORIES*, or anything else that is on your minds. Come on, this is a free for all, no holds barred.

However, we're making a few changes, as of this issue. Because some letters are late in being printed, the old illustration award is out. From now on, so that everybody will be treated fairly, the winners will receive their choice of illustrations in the issue immediately preceding the one in which their letters appear. When writing, do not indicate the illustrations you prefer; instead, wait until your name is announced as a winner, then send a postcard, indicating your preference. Your pic will hit the mails the same day we receive your card.

And look, be good sports and limit your letters to three double-spaced typewritten pages! Then more letters can be printed, you can meet more readers—and there will be no necessity for cutting some of your missives to the barest skeleton.

We like this department; we want it to be the best possible; and we're asking you to help us achieve that goal. Be concise, without being statistical. Don't indulge in biting personalities. And write us a letter the minute you read a new issue of *PLANET STORIES*; for with this new bi-monthly schedule, letters must be sent to the printers with all possible speed.

But enough of that. The writers who rate the originals in the March issue are:

1—Wizard Wade—2—Alden Verity—3—Mrs. Lucille Wilson

STIMULATION

26 Horatio Street,
New York, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

I've been reading STF a mighty long time; in fact, when I read my first Science-fiction story, I had a full head of hair. Now not even the "eye of faith" can see any hair on my cranial rooftop... which should give you some idea of how many STF yarns I've absorbed. And years ago I decided that there's nothing new under the sun, at least in the field of Science-fiction. But my cranium

hasn't crystalized to the point where I can't change my opinions . . . and the Vizigraph is *making* me revise at least one opinion! It IS something new; not in idea, but in the "spirit" of the thing! And I nearly missed it!

Y'see, Wilbur, many years of reading the same old stereotyped fan-letters had about done me in; I'd reached the point where I'd never read the "letters-to-the-editor" pages unless I was desperate for something to read. Perhaps that's why I've never, until right now, written a fan-letter myself! I'm sorta particular about the company I keep! And I'd have "skipped" the Vizigraph too, except for the fact that the "cut" around the title happens to be a darn swell bit of black-and-white! Good tonal balance, simplicity of treatment that rings the bell! I spent a few minutes admiring it, and merely "happened" to read the first letter in the Winter issue, Vol. II, No. 1. That was Loyal M. Sanford's letter; and I was decidedly surprised to find an intelligent, yet kindly, criticism; obviously sincere, and definitely *not* the usual gushy bid-for-editor's-attention that I'd come to believe was the typical fan-letter. My prejudices received a very welcome jolt; and I kept right on, until I'd read every one of the letters in this issue . . . a phenomenon which hasn't happened in many, many years. The Vizigraph MUST have "something on the ball" to make me do that!

Well, what IS the "difference" which makes the Vizigraph stand out head-and-shoulders above the fan-depts of the other STF mags? Honest, Wilbur, I really gave that matter some thought! and the answer? "PERSONALITY!" Double on that . . . not only does the dept itself have a personality that makes it superior to the amorphous growths which up to now have passed for fan-letter depts in various STF mags; but the personalities of the FANS are really given an opportunity to blossom in the Vizi! After reading the letters in this issue, I felt that I'd like to meet some of the fans who wrote 'em; and that is a complete and unblushing reversal of my previous attitude! Since I admit (also unblushingly) that this issue is the *first* I've read of the Vizigraph, I'm not in a position to "criticize" the letters, but there's at least one which I'd like to comment upon:

Milt Lesser, in his clean-cut and conscientious analysis of "What's-Happening-To-Planet?" has struck right to the heart of the problem! He's quite correct! I like his use of the term "VASTNESS" . . . that's what this mag HAD and which brought me into the fold as a reader; and that's what it has LOST. Not entirely, of course; but there's been too high a percentage of "cheap adventure" swill lately; and believe me, Wilbur, this sort of thing is NOT balanced by an occasional bell-ringer! One "honey" of a yarn can't remove the bad taste of swill!

That is one man's opinion of course . . . OR IS IT?? Lesser seems to think so too, and I wonder how many more letters you'll get, seconding his motion? Do you mind if I tell you a few of the things about PLANET which I like?

Well, whatever you do, don't lose Paul! In my opinion, his illustration for OUTPOST ON IO is superb! Composition is unusually fine, drawing is good. Paul manages to convey a feeling of competence; there are *three* qualities about a Paul illustration: (1) his *technique* is "personal" and unrestrained; he is not trying to imitate Finlay, or Beardsley, or anybody; he is "Paul," thank Heaven! (2) He has *imagination*; I feel that his power of visualization is so fertile that he has to exercise critical selection; he probably imagines

dozens of details that he does NOT put into the drawing, and he eliminates all but the few "symbols" which most accurately convey his feelings of mood and of situation. And, (3), (probably as a result of No. 2), he induces and *impels imagination on the part of the reader!* Paul's illustrations are a SPRINGBOARD from which I leap out into a vast universe; his drawings are a "door out of this world!" COLOSSUS OF CHAOS gave him a chance to have fun with the idea of "relative size" which I think he has handled well. SPOILERS OF THE SPACEWAYS rather limited him by the context; this illustration hasn't the "sweep" that most of his drawings have. But my money is on that illustration for OUTPOST ON IO; in fact, I'm tempted to mutilate the mag and frame it! No . . . I'm NOT his cousin, or even a friend; I've never met the man, tho' I'd like to.

While I'm on the subject of the illustrations, your own story, PLANET OF NO-RETURN was worthy of a better illustration than Fox produced! It is "documentary"; but it doesn't "titillate my imagination"; it does not make me want to "go on from there" and visualize more of that alien world! Knight's sketch for GALACTIC GHOST has the same fault; he too seems to lack imagination. It, too, is documentary in feeling; after studying it I was left with a "so what" feeling. Graef ditto! But Guy Gifford . . . AAAAH! Every line of that "Ringers" cartoon is "humorous"; this one *does* "send me!" More! MORE!

But the magazine has some *STORIES* in it too, you'll be saying. Yeah, I know. I read them. Perhaps I'm prejudiced about Nelson S. Bond; I've liked practically everything of his I've ever read, and I've read plenty! COLOSSUS OF CHAOS is a swell yarn; it has that "springboard" quality; when I read a story like that one I can see a great deal more than the actual words describe! Although this one is not an outstanding example of what I mean, the story has a "vast" feeling that I like . . . and which Lesser expressed so much more forcibly than I can.

Let's put it this way: when a story has that "something" I'm trying to describe, it gives me a chance to *participate*, with the characters, in the event being narrated. It is just as if two people were walking together down the street, and making random comments on what each sees. Due to the inevitable difference in viewpoint, each of them would place the *emphasis* differently upon the events they were seeing *together*. And a good author can give you that feeling; he's telling you what HE sees and experiences, but at the same time he is *stimulating* you to observe for yourself! It may be a "technical trick" . . . a "literary device" . . . I wouldn't know, for I wouldn't be able to do it. But I can recognize it when I find it!

Bond does it, nearly every time. Kubilius did it in GALACTIC GHOST; for I was on that stalled space-flier; I participated with Willard, in the feelings of utter helplessness and hopelessness. I knew how HE felt, because his feelings were accurately portrayed. But, what is better, *I was there too*; and I had my own personal feelings in the event. So I "felt" a lot of things that Kubilius *didn't* write, but which he stimulated me to feel!

To be quite honest about it, YOU did it too, Wilbur, in PLANET OF NO-RETURN. To begin with, your two characters, Kerry and Splinter, were sufficiently unlike each other to provide splendid opportunity for me to use my own imagination and "round out" their characters

from the frame-work you provided. But did you know that there was a THIRD MEMBER aboard? Yep, . . . it was ME, Alaul I was there too . . . and I just managed to duck out of the way of that vampire-creeper in time! While Kerry and Splinter were shooing off those giant crabs, I was looking around the landscape; and I noticed lots of things that you were too busy fighting to notice! There were other vampire-growths, that I saw and you didn't. But when Kerry appeared unexpectedly at the side-port, I was just as incredibly happy as Splinter; boy-o-boy did I breathe a sigh of relief! And I'm not saying this just because you are the editor, but because your story "clicked" with me.

I don't pretend to know which are the "best" stories in an issue, so I can't "rate" them, except to vote for the Bond yarn as "No. 1"! But I DO know that too few of the stories in PLANET, lately, have had that "priceless ingredient"; the ability to *STIMULATE THE READER'S IMAGINATION TO THE POINT WHERE HE PARTICIPATES IN THE ACTION*, rather than merely "looking on!"

Lesser certainly hit the nail on the head with his criticism! And he meant it, too; the obvious sincerity of his letter is what finally broke me down to the point where I'm writing "Fan-Letter No. 1!" Let's have more stories with "sweep" . . . with "VASTNESS" . . . let's have more of those yarns that swing us wide, right out of this plague-ridden and war-harassed world, into a NEW space-frame wherein we can feel the re-birth of that greatest of all senses, the Sense of Wonder! Dunsany did that, in the realm of the fabulous. But the world of fable perishes at the touch of "reality" . . . and that is where it differs from the world of Science-fiction. For a good STF yarn is *probable*; it may be "unlikely" as all git-out, but if it IS good, I for one am left with the feeling that maybe it DID happen, and I wasn't dreaming after all! See what I mean?

I suppose this letter is entirely too long to print, but I wonder how many of the readers would agree with me on that yardstick of "participation" vs "observation" as being the first requirement of a good STF story? And if, in addition, ye author can give us a universe with "sweep" . . . with "VASTNESS" . . . there's your formula for a really typical PLANET yarn!

As for originality of plot; IT'S A MYTH! I have read the same old plots, over and over again. I for one, do not even expect "new" plots; but I'm mighty particular and critical as to how the old familiar plot is HANDLED! In OUTPOST ON IO, the old familiar, faithful formula was used; "man saves world" . . . but boy-o-boy, HOW it was used! So what if I have been reading STF for more years than I like to admit? I *wince*d at MacVickers' "tongue-lashing," and I'll go for the same old plot again and again, so long as it is well-handled, as it certainly was this time!

New plots? Pfu!l

Well, Wilbur, you should feel mightily honored! YOU have received my *first fan letter*! I feel that you shouldn't mind my familiar use of your first name. Through your stories and comments I've met a "real" person, and I like to call the "real" people I know by their first names. I hope you've got it straight now; I like PLANET STORIES "mafeesh katir" . . . plenty good!

I rejoice with you whenever you bag a yarn with "sweep" . . . and I feel let-down when you hook a lot of literary minnows. And I LIKE the Vizigraph, and that "something plus" it has which enables the PERSONALITIES of the

fans to shine through their letters. That really "sums it up" . . . I've just glanced over the letters of this issue again, and it is darn near "remarkable," in my opinion, the way the fans let their hair down, and their opinions out! Some of the letters show a distinct "style" . . . to such a degree that I'm almost certain that I could recognize future letters from some of these fans, even if their letters remained unsigned! And take it from me, Wilbur, THAT'S SOMETHING! I've seen the term "OUR MAG" used in many a STF fan-column, but this is the FIRST time I've felt that it was anything more than eyewash! From now on, the Vizigraph is one "fan dept" I'll NOT miss!

Sincerely,

ALAN MANNION.

CONSUMMATION

Thanks, Mannion, your letter was just what we needed. We've taken so much kicking around in the past few weeks, we were beginning to believe that we alone knew that the basic element of the Vizigraph was its spontaneous personality. Now that we know another true believer has swelled our membership to *two*, we shall begin our annual campaign to bring another into the fold during 1943. And look, Mannion, as charter member Number Two it is your solemn duty to aid in this sacred obligation. Remember our valiant rallying cry: "*Virile Visifaners!*", and help us to make this a banner year.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

TOP DOG

Green Springs, Mo.

DEAR EDITOR:

Slaves of the Ninth Moon is the top dog on your roster this time. . . . I'm not kidding when I say that I was on the edge of my chair during the last third of the story. This is the best thing I've seen of this great author to date.

Speaking of authors, look at that contents page (which, by the way is the handiest to find of any mag . . . once I got used to it). It has stories by Brackett, Rocklynne, Hasse, BOND, and . . . Cummings. Wotta lineup. If you got that by going bi-monthly, why not try monthly?

Every last one of the shorts was excellent, with Star of Panadaur rating fourth, the other shorts tied for second. Can't agree with the Unhappy Moron (thanks to Stoy) in respect to Doolin . . . his pic for Oridin's Formula was good. WHERE'S LEYDENFROST? Can't locate any by him this ish.

Either I'm going soft (the sworn opinion of several friends attest this), I want to see it so much, or else Ray Cummings is really improving. It seems that the latest work of the (let us hope the happily reformed) Grand Hack is his best for a long time. Yes, I hear you snarling Vic, so there IS an alien girl, but Ray hasn't got up the nerve to kill 'em off yet. But look he's improving . . . this time the guy got away without her . . . even if he does promise to come back. And Peacock . . . don't ever let Ray sell you anything worse.

As to you using your own name Ed., why not? If you can write as well as Bond (chuckle), don't hide your light under a bushel. Of course the proposition is entirely up to you, but your last story was pretty good, and every little bit builds a reputation!

Is someone insinuating H. P. Pongley was Bob Tucker? If he was he otta come out in the open as the letter was one of the funniest.

Why don't you put your comments on letters in a different kind of type from the letters . . . it helps lots in reading them.

As usual Paul cops the top interior honors, where do you dig up the cover artists . . . last two covers have both been super-excellent.

Sincerely yours,
JAY CHIDSEY.

UNDERDOG

Yes, Rocklynnne is good—and we think his yarn in this issue will shove him a bit higher in his readers' estimations. You'll be seeing more of his stuff in future PLANET STORIES.

Sorry, but Leydenfrost has moved into the slicks, from where we hope he will find time to bring us some more of his work from time to time. BUT SURPRISE, SURPRISE!!!

His two sons, Bob and Harry, are pretty well represented in this issue. Our opinion is that they'll be giving their Dad pretty stiff competition before long; they have the Leydenfrost touch to their work. Harry is in the army now; but when he returns, we'll be running more of his pics. Bob will be back soon.

Thanks for the kind words anent my stuff; I'll take the kicks and kudos under my real name.

As for the two fonts of type—sorry, but too much work and extra effort involved for the too-short time we have in which to edit the many letters we receive into the Vizigraph.

As for covers, what's your opinion on this one?
Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

3956 Ledgewood,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

DEGENERATION

DEAR EDITOR:

First off, suppose we take the cover and subject it to a close scrutiny. Hmmmmm. Not bad, not bad at all. This new artist is good! But there is one serious fault. Nothing new, just the same old complaint—the theme of hero-heroine-and-the-nasty-monsters is awful. Get rid of it; it makes a swell magazine look cheap. However, 'tis a good cover for all of that; let's see more of Rozen. Suggestion: A good Paul cover would be very much appreciated by all.

In the fictional realm, Cummings' "The Flame Breathers" is way out in front. It's good to see Ray turn out work like this instead of the stuff he's been hacking out lately. Except for the carbon-copy introduction it was beautifully written, and, for once, our hero left the girl on her "weird little world" and trotted off to home. Thank Allah! Using my devilishly clever 1 to 10 rating system, this tale gets a well-deserved 9.9.

Second place goes to "Citadel of Lost Ships." The whole yarn was quite well-written, with the first part being exceptionally vivid. The plot was good, too. Miss Brackett is going places.—9.7.

Next comes "Slaves of the Ninth Moon," Rocklynnne's latest Hallmyer epic. It maintains the standard of the previous tales with a somewhat different type of plot. It smacked a bit of a super-scientific crime story, but was very well handled. This is a fascinating series, but I think that the fans will soon grow tired of Scintillating Sidney; how about giving our sorrowful hero a rest? Ross could write the same type of yarn with a new main character, letting Hallmyer brood alone for a few issues.—9.6.

"Trouble on Tycho" takes fourth place. Bond is at his best on this type of story.—9.4.

"Star of Panadur" comes in fifth. Hasse is consistently good, and Albert dePina didn't detract from the yarn as far as I can see.—9.1.

Jacobi's "Cosmic Castaway" makes a good sixth-placer. A good tale, well-plotted, it was dragged down a bit by rather crude handling. For one thing, there were too darned many exclamation points clapped on sentences that didn't need them. A minor point? Perhaps. But it detracts from the story. However, this is to be expected in new authors, and it was quite an acceptable tale, so let's see more of Jacobi; all he needs is a little practice.—8.9.

Next comes a disappointment—"The Sword of Johnny Damokles." Parker gave the tale a new twist, but I'm getting sick of these hack future war stories. Give us something we can sink our teeth into and think about a bit.—7.2.

Last, least and lowest is "Oridin's Formula." A space pirate out to grab Earth! A secret formula! Thrilling action! Wonderful characterization! Gad, what a story! (All this is purest sarcasm.) Seriously, how did this thing sneak past the Ed's eagle eye? Fool—5.

The artwork this time was, frankly, scarce. There were two good pix this time—both done by Paul. Best was the beauty for "Cosmic Castaway," closely followed by the pic for "The Flame Breathers." None of the other pix were even worth mentioning, al-ho'-eh the work on the Brackett tale reminds me of Drake. Gad! Don't tell me your artwork has degenerated that much!

Also, the caption on the "illustration" for Rocklynnne's tale reads in part: ". . . she was utterly lovely and exotic . . ." Pardon me while I laugh. Hawwwwwww! That thing looks about as feminine as Joe Louis.

I think having fans presented in the "Feature Flash" is nothing less than a stroke of genius. Would like to see Stoy, Conover, and Shaw presented soon. I suggest having three issues devoted to fans and three devoted to professionals; this way nobody will be slighted.

Let I forget, here's my opinion on your publishing your own stuff in PLANET. By all means do so; if it's a good yarn put it in. After all, you've tried to give us what we want in PS—and succeeded—and it seems a very small thing for us to do in return. Keep 'em coming.

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER,
The Looney Lad of Ledgewood.

REGENERATION

Boy, do you lucky readers get a variety of stories in PLANET! You get adventure—and gripe. You get science-fiction—and raise Old Nick. You get quality—and don't like it . . . Grrrrrrr . . .

But that's what makes this job interesting; we like to try to give you the things for which you ask. We can't please everybody; but we do try. We get quite a kick out of putting this book together, for we're part of the gang that started reading science-fiction way back when. This particular field is as much a part of writing today as Dead-Eye-Dick was a few years back. It represents a healthy phase of our mental and social development—and we hope to see the time come when the public acknowledges the fact that its futuristic qualities are based upon a subconscious desire for the many advantages the future will bring to mankind.

Or are we getting just a bit too involved?

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

WE ASKED FOR IT!

1301 State Street
Schenectady, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

You've asked for it. Right there in black and white, you've asked me to write. So here I am, back after a two issues' vacation. Seriously, tho, I am far less able to get along without writing to PLANET than PLANET is able to get along without my letters. In the future, none of my "vacations" will be of more than one issue's duration.

I'll get down to the stories in this issue immediately, for I'm afraid that if I started with the Vizigraph, as I'd like to, I never would get around to the rest of the mag. As I expected, Rocklynne's "Slaves of the Ninth Moon" took top honors. Although it was not greatly different from the first three stories in the series, it definitely was not just a re-write of the others. It had almost everything you could want in a sf tale. Good plot, good suspense, just enuf action, no slop, no hack. I can't recall ever running across the idea of "perp-planets" before, either.

Second place goes to Mr. Hugh Frazier Parker. The name is unfamiliar—a newcomer? Whoever he is, he developed some grand characters and told a very clever story. The interest was sustained without a let-up from the very first words. As a whole, 'twas the most refreshing story I've read in some time, and I would like to see much more of Johnny Damokles.

"Trouble on Tycho" took third. The plot wasn't much, but Bond's usual good characterization and sprightly style made it exceedingly fine reading. These were all in the upper brackets, as was the Number Four yarn; which turned out to be (well! Willy look at Cummings, now??) "The Flame Breathers." Nothing too original here, but the adventure and suspense in it was enuf to carry it. Ray didn't slip into any of his usual sloppy tricks, either; the repetition of the familiar "thoughts are instant things" was annoying, but could be overlooked.

Next was "Star of Panadur," with a neat idea but not quite enuf kick at the end. Then: "Citadel of Lost Ships." This started out beautifully, and I found myself intrigued by the idea of "Romany," but Leigh let the possibilities in it escape, and ran off into a hacky jumble. "Oridin's Formula" followed, but maybe this is my own fault. I simply can't see how certainty could be reduced to an equation like Oridin's. The result would have to be a number, and exactly what good would knowing one number do anybody? But it had a hermit in it, which helped it a lot. The lead-off story brought up the rear, this time. It was completely unconvincing. The characters were pretty awful, too—especially the heroine Jacobi dragged in by the hair. Ugh!

The cover? Weel—I dunno. It wasn't too cluttered up, which is one of the common faults, and the colors weren't bad. But, the whole thing had a strangely jagged look. Oh, I guess I rather like it (the heroine is one of the best-looking so far), but don't you think it's about time we got a cover without the hero-heroine-monsters eternal triangle?

Mr. Paul (I've now had the very real pleasure of meeting him) easily took first and second places for interior art-work, with his double-spread and "Flame Breathers" pic, respectively. Third was the full-pager 101. The style looks vaguely familiar, but I can't identify the artist offhand. His pics are refreshing, anyway. Following in order were: Lubbers (watch the puns go by on his name), Doolin on page 39, the name-

less one's double-spread, Doolin's other try, and Walker. The last named is strictly from funny papers. The others are worth hanging on to, tho you might keep 'em down to one illustration apiece in the future, but BRING LEYDEN-FROST BACK! If you let him go the way of Bok, s'help me, I'll mow ya down!

Which takes care of everything but the Vizi. Give Verity a pic. Give Lou Wilson a pic. And give Gergen a pic, just to keep him quiet. I don't care for Conover's suggestion of article fillers. Few of them, if we can judge by other mags using them, would be worth reading. Besides, they look cheap. And Gergen's idea of limiting each fan to five originals is very, very bad. It was that sort of thing that made Charles Hidley, one of the finest letter-writers and nicest guys ever to tap a typer in PLANET's direction, quit writing. I admit I have been guilty of complaining about "professional" letter-writers myself, but now that I know how the "pro" feels to be called that, I would like to retract any statements of that order. Wouldn't it be much better to start a couple of other contests of a different nature with originals as prizes? Besides, I certainly wouldn't be eliminated; I've only won once so far.

For that bit where Herky twists the *imperum* wheel right off, "Muscles" deserves a very special prize! Heh-heh! I'm just as confused by time-travel as Lou Wilson, to tell the truth, but I can see two ways in which it might be possible. That is, for travel into the past, of course. First is the probable-worlds' theory, whereby any messing around our time-traveler did with the past would not change the present, but would simply be the beginning of a new probable world. There are too many things that could be said about this to go into here, however. The other possibility is that the traveler might go into the past and not do enuf messing around to make any difference in the future. The possibility of time travel depends, of course, on whether or not time actually is a dimension. If it is, it should be possible to travel in it. I don't make the common mistake of calling time the "fourth dimension"; if it is a dimension, the number would make no difference. We'd be living in a world of four dimensions, and that would be all there was to it.

And now to Harvey Marcy. *My little chum!* He could at least have gotten his facts straight. When I found myself without a girl at the last minute, I went to him in a direct and straightforward manner. I didn't consider an ish of PLANET too low a price; he was doing me a favor and I just wanted to be nice to him. Louise already had a date, and that was the only reason she didn't go. Of course, Harvey didn't think it necessary to mention the fact that Doris didn't go with him, either!

But I'm going to be nice about this thing. I'm not going to descend to personalities. After all, I can show that I at least know a little better than that . . . er, watch yourself, Shaw . . . Marcy kid. But I maintain, Mr. Peacock, that the Vizifans aren't at all interested in my private affairs. And there, I hope, we will let the matter rest. (Besides, living in the same city, I have a much more efficient and satisfying way of taking care of Marcy!)

Lesser is getting so mixed up with words, words, words that it is becoming almost impossible to understand him. Cool off and take it easy a while, Milt. Wacky Wade is almost as bad (nyash to you, too, WWW!). Chad Oliver, on the other hand, seems to be quite a likeable chap.

Your idea of presenting the fans in Feature Flash is terrific. Let us look at Marlow, Gergen, and some of the girls. Also Hidley—and right here I'd like to make a public request that he return to the Vizigang. (He's in the army now, in case you didn't know.) This idea fits right in with a suggestion you've probably received from the Trojan Horse, Jack Gavin, whom I met in Schenectady recently. He was going to plug for a fanzine department in PLANET STORIES. I don't know exactly what he intended it should contain, but he mentioned having pictures by fan artists. Other items might be the fan biographies, and a section where we could argue such questions as time travel. (I know that theoretically we can do that in the Vizi, but I also know that there usually isn't room in our letters for such.) Anyway, read his letter and think it over carefully. PLANET is the mag to do it if any mag is.

Brief and to the point, ain't I?

Sincerely,

LARRY SHAW.

(The Recluse of Asteroid 1301).

SO WE TAKE IT!

Welcome home, Stranger, we're glad to see a letter from you any time. You seem to have more or less redeemed yourself, so now you can write us at closer intervals.

As for the contests; wheewwww, do you think up work for us. As for the discussions: well, maybe we could devote one page of the Vizigraph exclusively to such. Each column would be a letter, each from different people—both in regard to the same subject. You would have to hit word-length right on the nail, or get your arguments edited out, tho. Anyway, some of your Vizifanners write in and give your opinions.

Sorry about that private affairs business; but when a letter comes in, we figure that the writer must be the one to qualify the statements made. Anyway, don't you know a *little beet* of dirt about Marcy?

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

CONSERVATIVE HETSCHLI

5531 Roberts Avenue,
Oakland, California.

DEAR EDITOR:

Winter Issue.

My first squawk is dedicated to Mr. Anderson for his cover splashes. The scene was too lurid and the colors too clashing (as usual). PLANET has been suffering from this type of external ailment since it started. For any other mag I'd raise my voice against the excess wordage on the cover, but in the case of PLANET the more of the pic covered the better. Even "good" artists seem to do their worst work for your covers. Why not give us just one conservative cover and test the reaction?

First stop inside the mag is the Vizigraph.

Open letter to L. Sanford:

Yes, Mr. Sanford, I do consider your missive vituperative. You talk about other fans wasting paragraphs on useless rambling, yet you carry on for six paragraphs about something no more important than titles and captions. The stories are the important part of the mag, with departments, illustrations and physical characteristics (such as binding) next. A title's main duty, however (so far as I know), is merely to make a story more easily identifiable and catalogueable, while titles

and captions together are supposed to give the reader a dim idea of what the story is about. Enjoyment of a story depends upon the story itself and not upon the title or what the editor says about it. Personally I don't mind what you talk about, but it seems that you should give us the same freedom. The letters you criticized were at least interesting.

Conner has a good idea in his Stf club. It's refreshing to read ideas like this even though nothing ever comes of them. Anyway, Ed, if you should take him up on this, special mag, et al, you can count me in.

Now to throw another opinion at Cummings. Yes, he's at the bottom of my list, too. Just the same, he couldn't be as bad as the fans are painting him. Although he didn't have a story in the preceding issue, he was probably the most talked-of subject in the Winter Viz. Eleven out of the eighteen letters commented on him, several at length. Only two were in his favor. What's the use though, of all of us running him down. He can always disguise himself in a pen-name. He's probably operating under several of them right now. (And we're probably lauding them to the skies.)

Though I'm using the 1 to 10 rating system, I have my own way of handling it. Many fans rate all stories above five no matter how poor they are. For instance take Oliver's letter. He rates all eight of the stories in the fall issue between 9 and 10, (and don't say the ish was that good) even though he has only derogatory remarks for two of them. I am considering 5½ as average, 8½ as semi-classic, and 9 as classic. You wouldn't have to take off your shoes to enumerate the stories I rate as 10, including all the Stf ever published in mag form.

"Colossus of Chars"—7. Characterization was poor, writing and atmosphere were only fair, but the plot saved it.

"Planet of No-Return"—3. Sorry Ed. Didn't care for the plot. Atmosphere was fairly good, though.

"Spoilers of the Spaceways"—5½. Below Jones' average. There were only traces of his usually fine atmosphere and characterization.

"The Man From Sisykul"—6½. Nicely written. The plot, though, was not very new.

"Meteor Men of Mars"—3½. Started out O. Q. but too much hack action took over about halfway through.

"Doorway to Destruction"—6½. Good plot.

"Outpost on Io"—4½. Nothing very new in plot. The atmosphere was pretty good.

"Peril of the Blue World"—4. Fairly well written, though the plot was not so good.

"Galactic Ghost"—5. Kubilius can always tell a story well. The plot was only fair.

The average of this issue was 5.05. The general average is 5.50.

By the way, I forgot to congratulate you on going bi-monthly. Don't let it affect your quality! How about more Rocklyne and Gallun? More Jones, too, if he can find time off from the army.

And, lastly, we come to the illustrations.

First place, this time, goes to Leydenfrost. This scene is a bit too common in Stf, but, in this case, it was beautifully done.

2. Paul for Brackett.

3. Paul for Bond.

The Paul's this issue were not quite up to his par, but having three of them was appreciated. Paul, incidentally, is my favorite.

Graef isn't so good.

I've racked my brain(!) for a good title to put

under my name, but could find none, so I'll just have to close with the usual

Sincerely,

DICK HETSCHER.

SECRETIVE PLANET!

Sorry, but we're afraid the Stf club idea is out; others are flourishing much better than any of ours would. And Cummings seems to us to be better now than he has been in quite a while. And as for pen-names—ha! we're laughing, for we know secrets.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

SHE LIKES US!

2 Crosby Street,
Nyack, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

Wanta know sumpin . . . I like your magazine! Yessir, I do. And I am going to settle down and tell you why . . .

For one thing it held me quite breathless for a solid afternoon . . . even beyond the time I should have been (but wasn't) fixing the hubby's dinner. After I once got my nose into the "Planet of No-Return" I was a goner . . . T.N.T. wouldn't have been able to blast me loose . . . When I caught my breath after that gruesome "Thing" I quickly shut my eyes and turned to "Spoilers of the Spaceways." Gee whiz . . . whoever said there wasn't any ROMANCE in the space magazines . . . I fell in love with Crespy even before I found out he was a Lieutenant of the Interplanetary Guard. Sigh, sigh!!!

Myra and Steve in "The Man from Siykul" were really something to get your teeth into. . . . Myra was so darn cute and actually acted like a wife. That story made me laugh with joy at its witticisms. I got quite a bang out of "Peachy."

But, doya know somethin' I'll be hanged if I could make heads or tails out of MacVickers in the "Outpost on IO." I guess Leigh Brackett knows what he's talking about. . . . But I didn't! "Meteor Men From Mars" . . . oooh . . . I liked that . . . anyway I am just a sucker for those stories about people than can "hide" under NAILS.

Does this letter sound inane to you . . . I sure hope not . . . I am giving an opinion and a serious one at THAT . . . and if you want me to continue reading your "mag" don't YOU dare snub me. . . .

Galactic Ghost or something . . . gave me the creeps . . . I swear I felt sorry for that poor old guy . . . I guess I would have been seeing "Ghost Ships," too, after so many years in one spot. But I'll be darned if I would have gotten into the other ship without their showing me credentials . . . so there.

I'm afraid that I thought the Peril of the Blue World a trifle juvenile . . . but then who am I?

The Doorway to Destruction was very good . . . but gee whiz it wasn't long enough . . . seems to me Mr. Hatfield was rather stingy . . . don't you think or do you?

I didn't say which of the stories I liked best . . . should I? Well, I will anyway. I think that Planet of No-Return deserves first place. I found it most interesting. Second place goes to Meteor Men of Mars 'cause I just LOVE love!

Now that I have bored you with my nonsensi-

cal letter . . . I will wait till your next issue to see if it can possibly TOP this one.

Yours for A BIGGER PLANET STORIES,

I am,

Sincerely,

JANE HERNDON GAVIGAN.

AND WE LIKE JANE!

Jane, if the Vizigraph were but the length of one letter, yours would be printed! By golly, we've waited years for somebody to brag about our yarns, other than ourselves—and you're our adopted fan club as of this very moment.

Seriously, we hope you'll write again, for our feminine readers seem to think this department is only for the men. We want your opinions, too, for you make up a goodly portion of our readers—and we'd like to publish stories of the type which you enjoy.

But, *sotto voce*, Leigh Brackett is not a man. And poor male that we are, we don't even profess to guess what any (except you, of course) woman is talking about. All we know, is that she is destined to be one of the finest science-fiction writers of this generation.

Emancipation. . . .!

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

FOX'S FISH!

616 E. McCarty Ave.,
Jefferson City, Mo. .

DEAR EDITOR:

Really now, pal—is that any way to bring to a close a heretofore perfectly good year? I'm talking about the Winter issue of PLANET, which happens to be the very worst in the past two eventful years.

Three stories in the ish were readable. Six stank to high heaven. Two of the three readable stories would have rated last in any other mag. Bond's story was good. No more. Not a classic. Not particularly new. Just good.

Second we have Abernathy's delightful little satire, *Peril of the Blue World*. I liked the semi-Injun names Bob gave the Martians. My favorite, I believe, was Zesmo Who Fell in the Canal When an Infant. In the words of Conway III, hah!

The third, and none too good, story was Kubilius' *Galactic Ghost*.

The cover was very good, if not exactly accurate.

In the interior, Paul was not as good as usual. Was surprised to see Fox. He is better than he was back in 1940, but still has a certain stiffness in his figures. I couldn't help but have the feeling that his space-ship resembled a fish! I wonder if anyone else noticed this, or was it just my imagination? This fellow Doolin is good, but warn him to go a little lightly on his grease pencil, or charcoal—which is it? Gifford's cartoon was great. Don't ever let this guy Guy get away! Graef, with a little more experience may turn out to be good. Dam(O)n Knight is at his best this ish, and Leydenfrost is at his worst. When he takes his time, he is the greatest artist in the field, and whatever you do or not do in the future, you have the honor of introducing him to the s-f world.

For almost seventeen years, gentlemen, science-fiction rags have been available on the newsstands. For seventeen years these mags have carried stories in them. For seventeen years these stories have had titles, and no one ever complained.

But now, after years of patient silence, one

Loyal M. Sanford comes along with the remark that the titles in PLANET are sensational.

No other mag has sensational titles—just PLANET, just PLANET. He doesn't like the titles.

Here is a title for the story which Mr. Sanford would like to have seen. *The Journey of a Centaurian Named Rat who Escaped from a Planet that Everyone Thought was Impossible to Get Away From.* How's that, Loyal M.? Like that better, fans? Just what I thought. No, no, Sanford.

Sanford, I know a fellow who spells his name Sanford. He has brains.

So at long last PLANET's going bi-monthly, huh? I, for one, am glad to see the change. Of course, I've got a few suggestions to make concerning the coming event, but they will not be heeded, so why print them? But we need something to take up space in this letter so here goes.

First, as to the covers. Two a year by Leydenfrost. His Summer painting was swell. I by Paul, and I by Finlay. Assign the other two to whom ever you see fit. Warning—keep Saunders away from Planet!

Keep the interiors like they are, with the addition of Bok and Finlay. Don't ever get Lynch to do another doodle. Hoskins is poor. Not never no Morey nohow.

Stories: A novel every issue, but be sure they are by someone who can do them well. Binder, Bond, Kuttner, Rocklyne, Kummer, Jr., and Ayre would be welcome. Have them at least fifteen pages longer than Bond's for Winter. Two good novelettes an ish should be enough, and some good, interesting shorts, but no more hack tripe like this time. No cummings! (I think every one should take Victor King's idea of non-capitalizing the Grand Hack's name. Just plain ray cummings.)

Have at least two Ballads by Bond a year, spaced evenly apart, until they get tiresome. Give Gifford a page each issue for the Ringers.

Keep the Viz. just as it is—(hah, Lesser. There's a good poem for you) At least twelve pages each time.

And now . . . And now, chillun, comz the grate suggestshun! HOW ABOUT TRIMMED EDGES TO BEGIN 1943? Give it thought, dear editor, give it thought. Charge an extra nickel if you must, but trimmed edges would be worth it. I am sure no loyal upholder of The Cause would resent paying the extra thirty cents a year.

Another thing—keep the cover lettering at a minimum. The block letters you used this time were certainly a welcome surprise, but the authors listed at the bottom of the page were not necessary.

Thanx, for listening.

Sincerely,
GENE HUNTER.
The Space Falcon

PLANET'S PABLUM!

You've got a slick idea there, Hunter. We'll run the stories for titles—and vice-versa. But, *Ho Hum*, we suppose somebody will complain about that!

As for the suggestions. Well, remember PLANET STORIES is but an infant; if he grows too fast, his muscles may not be able to carry his weight. And he's one baby we really intend to coddle. Anyway, we're working on some of your suggestions, along with a few ideas of our own. Hang around; the year is barely started.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

WRATHFUL WRITER!

DEAR EDITOR:

For a long time I have been reading PLANET, and getting sicker and sicker of some of the drooling letters in the Vizigraph. For pete's sake, is the realm of fantasy degenerating into a bunch of fumble-brained debaters of nonsense? I feel almost ashamed to call myself a reader of fantasy after seeing what some readers of fantasy write in their letters. Like the Zoot-suiters, they have vast inferiority complexes that must be bolstered by loud and insulting yelling. How can science fiction be of any weight in reading as long as its readers make asses of themselves?

On the other hand, I think you are doing a good job of presenting interesting material to the insatiable maws of futuristic hungry minds. Your Winter issue, 1942, proves this.

1. *COLOSSUS OF CHAOS*—Nelson S. Bond—These giant stories keep cropping up from time to time, and I'm just sucker enough to like them.

2. *OUTPOST ON IO*—Leigh Brackett—Sorry Leigh, this hurts me as much as it does you. I hate to have to give a story by you second place. I dunno how it is, but you just seem to strike me where I live every story.

3. *GALACTIC GHOST*—Walter Kubilius—This sort of story appeals to my fatalistic nature. . . . I really get a kick out of it.

4. *METEOR MEN OF MARS*—Too many characters Messrs. Cord and Kline, too much action . . . too, too confusing. But interesting. . . . I'll say that for you.

5. *DOORWAY TO DESTRUCTION*—Garold S. Hatfield—No heroine, no romance, no handsome hero . . . it just can't be true, it's too good to be true, that there is someone who would write just a good story.

6. *THE SPOILERS OF THE SPACEWAYS*—Neil R. Jones—The romantic angle of this is so old it's tripping on its whiskers, but I still like it.

7. *PLANET OF NO RETURN*—Wilbur S. Peacock—Wilbur, anybody who can invent a new animal is okay by me.

8. *PERIL OF THE BLUE WORLD AND MAN FROM SIYKUL* tie for last place, not because they aren't interesting, but because they are the least interesting . . . get it?

Pictures . . . Paul's illish for "Outpost on IO" and Leydenfrost's for "Metormen of Mars" tie for first place; swell pix. Third is Paul's for "Colossus," fourth for Fox for "Planet of No Return," fifth for Gifford's cartoon; the rest, also ran.

Sincerely,
NANEK.

EVASIVE EDITOR!

We reread the story of the golden goose the other night. Had quite a bit of fun, too. The next day we began work on the Vizigraph letters.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

156 S. University Street,
Blackfoot, Idaho.

PERFECTION

DEAR EDITOR:

Here are a few thoughts on the Winter P. S. Yes, I too must exclaim "Ulp" over the thought of Lesser being serious for a change. What's happened?

Cover: Nice action, nice color, nice shadows—but it's still far from being one of the best. I like the letter-style for the blurb on Bond's story. Enough said, and I do mean enough.

Departments: up to snuff, and then some; thanks for Gifford's return.

Illustrations: the best ones are all by Paul, this time. Leydenfrost trails behind, this time.

Stories: three tales have been chasing each other up and down the ladder of success. I haven't separated them yet. Not in order of merit, here they are: "Colossus of Chaos," "Outpost on Io," "Meteor Men of Mars." Rather a slump, this time; not one of these comes up to the list of Top Yarns for Volume One. Bond has a nice story, but he attempted something too big for him—more in Binder's line; Brackett should have doubled the length of her yarn; and the other story simply has an almost unworkable theme. Kline and Cord squeezed out all that any author could from that ancient plot, but something new is needed.

Well!—a nice issue; no real duds in it; no Cummings—but you've done better. Much better. Take, for instance, a year ago this month; then you gave us "Man of the Stars." Or two years: "Twilight of the Tenth World." I'm afraid Lesser is right; and this bi-monthly proposal may knock things completely haywire. If I were editor, I'd stay quarterly for a while. . . .

Sincerely,
PAUL CARTER.

OBJECTION

We've been wanting to say this for some time, and this is the opportunity we've been looking for. It has no bearing on Carter's letter, but is written to quite a few of the fans.

Oddly enough, all stories can't be classics. Stranger still, we buy the best that are submitted to us. Quicker enough, we'd like to print the best in the entire s-f field. And certainly, we are doing the best we can to please you Vizifanners.

But we think this criticizing business is getting out of hand. It is no longer a matter of constructive criticism, but rather, is getting just a bit of the vituperative side. Authors do the best they can; they have more to lose by the writing of a poor story than the readers. Editors buy the best stories purchasable, and artists draw the best they know how. You readers are the final judges; but don't you think you are being a bit unfair in some of your letters. Stories should be judged unto themselves, for some are naturally better than others, for the simple reason each treats of a different theme and subject. More could be said upon the subject, but perhaps you will see our point. Anyway, think it over, please.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

UGH!!!

1219 N. E. Roselawn Street,
Portland, Oregon.

DEAR EDITOR:

UG. UG. That little green man on the cover. A fugitive from Planet Comics, yet. A good-looking dame, tho.

A new illustrator. Two new illustrators. Matt Fox is good, but about Graef—Ummmmmm?

The best illustration was Leydenfrost's for "Meteor-Men of Mars." Second place goes to Paul for his pic on p. 59. His pics on Page 40 (pardon me—Page 41) and Page 2-3, take third place. Fox, with his on Page 29 cops third place along with Paul.

Stories:

1. Wilbur, S. Peacock (or W. Scott Peacock) takes the prize with "Planet of No-Return."

2. Colossus of Chaos (Bond had a novel idea there).

3. "Outpost on Io," Leigh Brackett.

4. "Galactic Ghost," Kubilius. Slick explanation of the "Ghost."

5. "Spoilers of the Spaceways," Jones.

6. "Doorway to Destruction"; "Peril of The Blue World."

7. "Meteor Men of Mars"; "The MAN (?) from Siykul" I didn't gopher these last two reasons. Maybe it was just because they were written by gophers.

MY PET GRIPES:

1. Authors who INSIST on working a heroine into the plot for "romantic interest" no matter where the hero happens to be, be it Mars, Sirius, Fourth dimension, Center of the EARTH, or the Future.

2. Saturnians, Uranians, Neptunians, Plutonians. Also: Titanians, Oberonians, Iapetians, or Men from Phoebe. That is; unless they are "frigid-blooded poison breathers." For, as far as science has determined, Saturn has a temperature of -300 degrees. Could any known form of life exist at a temperature of minus three-hundred degrees? The planets beyond Saturn are colder, probably absolute zero.

3. PLANET STORIES does not print enough of Ross Rocklynne, Henry Kuttner, and Isaac Asimov. Also not enough of Leydenfrost.

ER—just one question Ed. ER—did that little green man on the cover escape from Planet Comics? (And why do they call 'em "covers"? That's something your cover gals don't have much of.)

Sincerely,
GERALD WAIBLE
"The Asinine One"

AHHH!!!

Okay, Vizifanners, this is it; this is the pinnacle, the acme, Heaven on Earth. . . Two people like our stuff. Sorry, three people, for we think we're pretty good, too! You think we're kidding; then grab up copies of the April Action Stories, or the February Jungle Stories—both of which you should have been reading long before this, anyway.

We've pasted both letters over our shaving mirror, where we can read and take bows at the same time. Bond, Kummer, Rocklynne—ho hum! Nice boys, but—

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

HE WISHES US LUCK!

401 So. Lafayette
Denver, Colo.

DEAR EDITOR:

I am about to let go a blistering stream of invectives at your illustrious personage, so bat-ten down your hatches and duck. My first gripe is why bear down on the Lesser-Sanford feud? It is one of the best features of the whole magazine, not to say the best of the Vizigraph. Please, please, let them battle it out. My second gripe

is why have such crummy drawings. I have been reading *PLANET* ever since its start in life and have watched its drawings get worse and worse, until lately, when some improvement has been gratefully noticed.

Now in an attempt to show you which stories are good and which bad, I shall grade them. 1st. Citadel of Lost Ships; a good novelet, however not outstanding due to its old, wornout plot. 2nd. Trouble on Tycho; rated high because of its freshness. 3rd. Cosmic Castaway; a good story but indefinite in spots. 4th. The Sword of Johnny Damokles; I almost rated this short 1st. but stuck it down in 4th, because of its improbability; by that, I mean how could two men defeat an entire planet by themselves? 5th. The Flame Breathers; fair story, but a stale plot. 6th. Ordian's Formula; good plot, poor story. 7th. Star of Panadur; good plot, poor story, rates just a point below the 6th. 8th. Slaves of the Ninth Moon; mainly because I don't like Rocklynne's style. All the first four stories were above par, but the last four (in our order of rating) were C-O-R-N.

Getting back to drawings; this month's cover was plenty good. Give us more of this stranger, Rozen. All interior drawings were good except Doolin's and Walker's. Paul's rated first with Lubbers' a very close second. The others were good.

Well I wish you luck in your new volume and in the new year. Resolutions I have made for you, come now. Lay off quarrels in the Vizigraph; Improve illustrations; Improve stories; and become a monthly.

Sincerely,
S. T. BROWN.

AND WE'LL NEED IT!

This kid is really bloodthirsty, although inconsistent. He wants Lesser and Sanford to come to blows—and then admonishes us not to permit quarrels in the Vizigraph. You know, sometimes we think that we should just set some of the Vizifanners' letters into type, without editing—then duck back!

Anyway, we're grateful that some improvement in things has been noticed. That's the one thing that kept us from cutting our throats.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

OVATION!

Box 165,
St. Anthony, Idaho.

DEAR EDITOR:

Hip, Hip, Hooray! Hip, Hip, Hooray! Hip, Hip, Hooray! Three cheers for P. S. The greatest news I've heard in ages was *PLANET* STORIES going bi-monthly. I just had to write in about it. And now comments on Volume II, No. 1 of P. S.

I liked the cover. It's the first cover on a science-fiction magazine I've seen by Anderson. We should have more, by all means. The top inside illustration goes to Leydenfrost, of course. Next is Paul's on page 59. The worst is by Knight for Galactic Ghost. It's awful. Where did this guy, Fox, come from? This was the first I've seen of his work and he looks good.

Next, the stories. First place goes to "Meteor Men of Mars." Something new on an old theme. Second was "Planet of No Return." I liked this

story because of the tension in it. Stories like this hold the interest all the way through. Third "Outpost on Io"; and crowding it very close comes "Spoilers of the Spaceways" for Fourth place. The other stories were fair but not good enough for special comment.

I got a brainstorm all of a sudden and just to see what happens I'm going to pass it on. Why not have an amateur corner. You could limit the number of words of each entry and for prizes give originals as you do in the Vizigraph. The entries could be anything pertaining to Science Fiction: stories, artwork, poems, or fact articles. Gee! just think what you might uncover among us brilliant fans. Now the Vizigraph.

Yay Ed. for your comeback to Loyal (?) M. Sanford. What if we had to read letter after letter like his? What a gruesome thought—Mr. Pongley, no wonder people think S.F. fans are crazy. When they read letters like yours and Raym's what else are they to think. Banks Mebane. So Cummings uses *leprous* in his stories. Well, well, I've heard of a lot of ways to pick an author's work to pieces but yours takes the cake. The "Happy Genius" didn't sound overly happy this time. I hope the Ed's note cheered you up a little. Albert F. Lopez—You say quote "Note to Stanley Haynes and others" End quote. As I am a Cummings' fan I take the words "and others" to apply to me. In that contest of yours, if you're that good, why aren't you writing stories? This fact alone proclaims it to be a gross prevarication. I hope Mr. Haynes don't let you get away with what you said about him. I anveal to Chad Oliver. You said you like Cummings. Would you say he's as bad as most fans paint him? I'll admit some of his stories weren't so hot but I think his good stories outweigh his bad ones by a very great margin. While I'm on this subject, I will vote No. 1 goes to Gwen Cunningham. Read what she says about Cummings and then blush with shame you scoffers. No. 2 goes to Paul Carter. Not because we're from the same part of the country either. All of his observations are good ones. Third is Wilkie Conner. His ideas are superb.

Now comes another plea for trimmed edges. Trimmed edges will do more for *PLANET* STORIES than anything else in the last year or so has done. Why not be among the first in the Science-Fiction Field to have trimmed edges? You won't regret it. Come on, everyone. Let's plague the Editor with the plea for trimmed edges. Make it so strong that they will have to do it. Then we can be proud of ourselves for really helping our favorite magazine.

Well, guess I'd better stop so that there will be room for other fans who want to express their opinions. Don't forget about my brainstorm. The longer I think about it the better it sounds. So long.

CLINTON BLACKBURN,
(Scourge of the Vizigraph)

NEGATION!

Dear Scourge, you really sling a wicked pen. And your letter makes a good deal of sense, although some of your suggestions can't be met with at this moment. As for amateurs; why not send your stuff in, anyway? Perhaps it will be good enough to make you professionals? Oh, happy day! Then the amateurs can kick you around.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

WHAT IS SO RARE—?

Garden City, Kansas,

DEAR EDITOR:

Hooray for PLANET for coming out bi-monthly. It's still not often enough. I just finished the Winter issue of PLANET, and all in all it was swell. From Cover to Cover ! ! And that is rare. Start with the cover.

Anderson is excellent, magnificent use of perspective and for once I think the artist really read the story. I like your heading. I loathe the titles on the cover.

Next, Paul has outdone Anderson on the illustration for "Colossus of Chaos." That boy is a real artist. "Spoilers of the Spaceways," "Outpost on Io" and Paul again. When I see his pictures they get me, so real, they fit the story, and superb art.

Fox's drawing lacks life. Looks like he used a ruler and T square.

Graef is great. Knight—good.

Leydenfrost—excellent. Another artist that can, and does read. (All foolin aside, can artists, outside of Paul, Anderson and Leydenfrost, read?)

Gifford's cartoon—HMMMMMM ! ! !

Now for the stories. The old 0-10 ranking.

"Meteor Men of Mars"—9—Would have rated ten if it had been longer, just a little bit more detail. A novel by Cord & Kline—Maybe?

"Colossus of Chaos"—8.5—Old, Old Story, all that got it the rank was Colossus.

"Spoilers of the Spaceways"—8—Good story. Good plot, Good writing, but something I don't know what, was lacking.

"The Man from Siykul"—7.99—Swell, should have been higher, but, alas, too, too, short. Let's have more of Wilson.

"Outpost on Io" and "Peril of the Blue World"—6.

"Doorway to Destruction" and "Galactic Ghost"—5.

"Planet of No-Return"—4.75.

Maybe I rated them too harshly, but I liked all of the stories. (You should see what happens to the ones I don't like.)

Now for "THE VIZIGRAPH."

In all the S-F mags I have ever read never has there been a letter department like this. When you get down to it, the mag is just right; of course you can't please everyone, with all the stories, but you can please most of them with most of the stories. I think like James Russell Gray about the cover girls, (Yes in this issue too) they are a bit-er-flat chested. I like 'em buxom too. But I don't see how he rates Paul below Leydenfrost, and twice at that. I do agree with the Happy Genius, PLANET has been "cheap-grade adventure hack." It did improve immensely in this issue.

Outside of this, I'm not, as yet, going to pan or praise any letters. By the way I like this idea of pen-names. So I'll blast off as:

THE CRAZY CHEMIST.

AS THOUGH WE CARED!

Okay, you get away with it this once—but no more. All letters must be signed by the writers. Even if you pan our effort!

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

LIGHTLY-CLAD GIRLS! ULP!

Nelson, Oklahoma.

DEAR EDITOR:

By the natural process of S-F Inspection we come first to the aforementioned Vizi. The letters, in my humble opinion, all are at approximately the same level (good). However, since I feel duty bound to select three, I do so. First, Banks Mebane, for expressing my feelings exactly with his, quote "No Cummings in Planet!" Second: H. P. Pongley for the mental scenes his letter dragged up. Third: Milt Lesser, for his clear concise communication on the down-grade of the last issue or so.

We approach, somewhat hesitantly, this issue.

The cover: CENSORED. In my lone lorn thoughts on covers I have come to the conclusion that they should always be still life, and always nice. I have just found that when they portray ships against a backdrop of space without trying to show motion or action, when they show Snake Mothers or uncommon creatures of any sort in their natural habitat without any one attacking them, or vice versa, and when they show people, lovely young women (preferably lightly clad), handsome young men, horrid old witches, and red bearded immortals, I like them. Occasionally, I admit, there is a good action painting. But I can think of none off hand, and I can think of a dozen such as I have tried to describe above.

Colossus of Chaos: Neither exceptionally good nor bad.

Planet of No-Return: Would be just barely better than fair if it weren't for the profanity. I like descriptive or unusual swearing, but not ordinary stuff, in character or not, such as you, dear sir, used.

Feature Flash: I can easily get along without it.

Spoilers of the Spaceways: Very good.

Doorway to Destruction: Didn't like it.

Outpost on Io: (Nice picture, would make a fair cover properly colored.) Didn't care for story.

Peril of the Blue World: I liked it very much.

The Man From Siykul: Good.

Galactic Ghost: Pretty good, however I prefer happy endings.

Meteor Men of Mars: Well, I admit it had a happy ending; couldn't be happier, I don't believe. Even so, I can only give it faint praise, for it seemed to me it was so much in the groove it was developing into a rut.

I would like to rate stories and pictures one, two, three; if others can, I should be able to. However, unless a story makes a deep impression, either good or bad, all I can in fairness do is make a shallow comment.

Suggestion for future issues. Print some fantasy. I dislike a lot of stuff that is supposed to be science fiction, but like almost all that is written as fantasy. In my opinion it takes a better writer to even try fantasy.

Sincerely,
FRANK BRYAN, JR.

PRETTY PROFANITY! HUH?

Sorry, Bryan, but PLANET STORIES uses no straight fantasy; you can find it in other books. As for swearing; we thought swearing was swearing—we hadn't heard of any fancy kinds!

So there! Too. . .

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

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